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(English)

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Editorial

In keeping with past precedent, this issue of Sheeraza (English) includes papers on a wide variety of subjects. Prof Rahman Rahi, the only Jnanpith awardee from Jammu & Kashmir so far, has enriched the Kashmiri prose in no less a measure than he did with his poetry. His introductions to various books of his contemporaries are important studies in their own right. One such introduction pertains to Somnath Zutshi's art of story writing, which has been proficiently translated into English by Prof Shafi Shouq. It is a paper of archival importance and is being carried in this issue. The Sufi ethos postulated in Sufi poetry continues to define the Kashmiri culture. Spiritual centres in the shape of shrines dot every nook and corner of the Kashmir valley. Rahim Seab Sopoer was one of the founding Sufi poets in Kashmir, who mentored succeeding generations of Sufi poets writing in the Kashmiri language. Khursheed Dar, in his write-up, sheds light on the legacy of this celebrated Sufi poet of Kashmir. Jammu is known for its rich tapestry of temple structures, some of them tracing their origin to ancient times. These temples exude the spiritual landscape the city is known for within and outside the country. The Mahamaya Temple, located close to Jammu city, is one such temple that has its origin in the ancient spiritual ethos of the city. Heena Mahajan, in her exotic paper, discusses the past and the present of this temple. Sufiana mousiqee, which goes with the Sufi culture of Kashmir, has remained one of the main components of Kashmir's spiritual heritage. Known for its exquisite maqams, classical rendition and spell-casting effect, this hallowed musical tradition is in the last throes of its existence. The music, once the majestic art form of Kashmir, is dying a speedy death. Waseem Raja, a scholar who has worked on this art form, profiles some prominent families associated with this dying art form. Lal Ded, even after centuries, continues to mesmerize the Kash-

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miri spirit and soul. Her vaakhs are a perennial inspiration for the Kashmiri imagination. Shamshad Kralwari's write-up explores a lesser-explored dimension of Lal vaakhs, that is, their European connection. The study is the first of its kind and is expected to generate a lot of interest among the intelligentsia. The majestic Chinar tree, popularly known as Boen in Kashmir, symbolizes much of Kashmir and its culture. Manzoor Akash, in his brief write-up, discusses the cultural importance of this tree. The art of painting took up in a big way in post-independence Kashmir. Many local artists made their name at the national level. One such legendary artist, Triloke Kaul, who is 99 years old, has shared some reminiscences with some of his friends via email. These reminiscences make for an important paper in themselves, discussing the emergence and growth of this art in Kashmir. The paper by Triloke Kaul himself is reproduced for its immense importance to the artistic history of Kashmir. Avtar Mota recollects his memories with Pran Nath Butt, another artist. We look forward to the valued feedback of our readers.

(Dr Abid Ahmad)

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Somnath Zutshi's Short Stories

An appraisal

Prof Rehman Rahi
Translation from Kashmiri by
Prof Shafi Shouq

Although the genre of the short story is quite new in the Kashmiri language, its development, nevertheless, has been much remarkable and admirable in it. This statement on the genre can be confirmed by studying the short stories of Somnath Zutshi contained in the present volume. This is now a widely accepted fact that the first short story in the language was written by Somnath Zutshi, who, therefore, is the founder of the literary form in the language. The form followed the track chosen by him in his youth for a very long time. Stories like "Thus the Day Dawned", and, later "Guest of One Night", "Chhut Chatak Chatak" and "Gang Mahal" prove it beyond any doubt that his journey augured the language good.

I met Somnath Zutshi for the first time in 1949. One of my early Urdu papers, titled "What is Marxist Criticism" was published in the Urdu daily of Srinagar, namely, Khidmat. The paper made Somnath Zutshi to come to see me, and his persuasion caused my joining the group of Progressive Writers of Kashmir. India had recently become politically independent and, as a result of this, in Srinagar a newly constituted semi-political and semi-cultural organization, under the banner name Cultural Front of Writers was established. The activities of the Cultural Front inspired me to join the group of writers who professed allegiance to Marxism. Weekly meetings of the Progressive Writers Front were held in a bark in the precincts of the Exhibition Ground of Srinagar, and many writers in Urdu, Hindi and Kashmiri of the sate, and many a time those from other parts of the country, presented their writings that caused

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heetic, enthusiastic and honest discussion, and the writings were analyzed in accordance with the Marxist way of thought. Somnath Zutshi was a prominent member of the Cultural Front, or, we may say, he was its soul. It was in this intellectual ambience that after Somnath Zutshi, several of his associates got inspired to write stories in Kashmiri after experimenting in Urdu; thus following the trends of the literary form in Urdu, the form was born in Kashmiri too.

The initial stories of Somnath Zutshi were intelligible to common readers; the dominant theme of the stories was the poverty-stricken life of the middle class, particularly the hard life of the working class of society. The popular approach of writers to the theme was superficial and conventional, and treatment was hardly skin-deep. Although the beginning of Kashmiri short story appeared interesting, it lacked creative energy. The historical importance of the stories cannot be ignored, and the intrinsic limitations caused the beginning of genuine creative journey of Kashmiri short story, and, eventually, Somnath Zutshi joined the journey.

Keeping aside the present critical jargon, we may safely say that Kashmiri short story of the earliest phase was based on characterization; the characters were such as appeared familiar in a familiar background, but only in appearance. Their actions are not self-generated and subjectively originated, but made under the compulsion of the writers' shallow political thought. The writers did not recognize the character found in the verbal medium, but it seems that the self of the characters' milieu as well as their actions were already constructed in the writer's mind. This method led the writers to present in words what they had decided to present before actual process of writing. The character obtaining in the early short story of the Progressive Writers of the time were idealistic, two-fold, and in keeping with the non-literary communist realism. Thus the writers did not allow their character to have freedom to construct their self, but made them unwittingly do such actions as had a pleasant and optimistic end. We may say that the short story was not created, but constructed. In terms of their treatment

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of the language, the story writers were not quite serious, and sometimes it appeared that the writers for the first time felt the phonetic and semantic beauty of the Kashmiri language, and, as such, used words for the sake of words. However, in the character-centred stories of Somnath Zutshi, we find Rajaba of 'Yearning' and Dinanath of 'The Veins and the Pain', and Taravati of 'At the Crossroads.' These characters seem to give proof of some kind of dynamic subjective existence.

It is generally believed that writers have to move upward and downward in various stages of craft, that is the reason that a satisfactory evaluation of a writer is possible only after keeping in view all of his best writings. If we aim at making an assessment of the creative power of Zutshi, we have to make an in-depth study of his stories like "One Night's Guest", chhut chatakh chhatak", 'Gang Mahal", "His Dream" and the like that attain verisimilitude of living situation. In the stories mentioned above, Zutshi ignores the programmed way of writing, and proves his individual sensibility and artistic existence.

"One Night's Guest" gives form to millennia-old historical exemplary "justice" and thus brings to fore a scaring dream to wakeful eyes. The justice is such as splits one whole existence into two segments. One here on this side of the mountains, that is son named Jameel of Shafiq Ada, whose forehead is pierced with a nail that makes him toss his feet in pain to become a restive unicorn. The other is the part that cries "O Bhagwan! O Bhagwan!" and returns but finds no one to accept him, even as a fossil. The communal discord in and around 1947 gave birth to many a classic of fiction in the languages of the subcontinent. In our Kashmir too, a terrifying collective tragedy unfolded after 1990, and Zutshi's short story, referred to above in the present collection, is a distinguished short story in terms of depth and artistic treatment; it makes us envision horrific scenes of a nightmarish experience. The short story is beautiful in terms of safety of thought, the flight of imagination, the energy of narration and suggestions. This is how an artist can give aesthetic form to the wound in the hearts, and tumults of thought.

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The stories "His Dream" and "Who the Duryodhans are they?" too are quite considerable creative stories in which dream-like fleeting situations, apparently hazy, but symbolic incidents give rise to illogical chains. In the former story, we find a procession of 'scars' resembling four-legged cattle tied to one rope and silently driven and towed through an ice-covered long, narrow and descending alley, and finally stopped at Hasyvanj and hurled over large boulders. Mihar Gul who guffawed while enjoying the spectacle, still stands like a statue, and if we close our eyes we may envision him there at Hasyvanj, half buried in earth whose ice nothing can melt.

In Zutshi's stories referred to above we encounter nameless, and space-less dreamy characters, transformed into referents like "he", "that" and "I" to become perceivable. Incidents as well as perceptions described directly, but following logical principles attain creative form and become plausible. The world of short stories through words accurately aimed at targets, is concretized to involve the readers creatively and startle them.

Story "Chhut chhatak chhatak" creates a de-familiarized and unconventional world through incidents, characters, and setting. Everything is presented inverted and discordant in a Kafkaesque manner to constitute symbolic situations that simultaneously appear local and contemporary, but at the same time displaced and beyond temporal reality.

The story titled 'Gang Mahal', is based on a paradox so far its theme is concerned, and a narrative in terms of its technique. Instead of presenting anyone's particular condition, it gives a picture of man's eternal contradiction and thus increases the pace of heart-throb. Man might hate noise, but it is ingrained in nature. We have noise of a machine, or even that of a musical pipe, but the despotic king has the authority to put an end to one or the other manner of noise, but one or the other kind of noise is his primordial destiny that cannot be avoided. Having aspiration is the cause of restlessness, that leads to making entire life a noise, and noise life; noise and life are just two pages of the same leaf of paper; to tear one page is to tear another page. Life might

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kill the king, yet the noise of life shall continue for ever.

The stories prove that Zutshi has liberated himself from the illusion of realism, and has attained the merit of creative realism. Literary realism has the magic of changing venom into elixir. The stories are a valuable contribution to Kashmiri fiction. Zutshi stood as a revolutionary and an avowed optimist during most of his life, but in the bunch of stories in the collection, he distanced himself from known reality and created artistic reality instead. He displays a serious approach to themes, and we feel sensible approach and grave treatment; all this is evidenced by his proper creative use of language.

In the story titled 'Butter-Thief of Jasoda', we come to know how Zutshi abandons artificial characters in his weaker moments, and how, in his best moments, he is able to activate his artistic being to create the puerile but authentic character of a child. In the same way, in his story titled "Who the Duryodhans are They?" he leaves behind his old vague political reaction and uses fresh artistic and oblique revolt. In "I am Convinced", he does not use his earlier slogan mongering, but such representative irony as makes us perceive an autonomous noise-less undercurrent that unwittingly surfaces itself and is felt even in the upper layers of water.

Zutshi was my companion endowed with simple attributes. Even having ideological differences with him and reacting emotionally too was based on sincerity and, as such, pleasing and acceptable. Zutshi's untimely demise was a depressing event for me. Reading his stories, referred to above, makes me believe once again that the artist never dies. I have been enlightened many a time by his innocent, honest and transparent conscience. His best short stories comprise one of our invaluable contributions to our heritage; while recollecting my association with Zutshi Sahab, I salute his soul for the said contribution!

(English translation of the Introduction by Prof Rehman Rahi to Yeli Pholl Gaash, a reprint of a collection of short stories by Somnath Zutshi. The translation is by Prof Shafi Shouq, eminent academic, writer and translator.)

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Mahamaya Temple, Jammu

An historical odyssey

Heena Mahajan

Introduction

Over a decade ago, my parents took us to a temple we had never visited before. Nestled atop a hill, this temple featured serene white-painted decor. From my very first visit, I was enchanted by its beauty and tranquillity. Since then, this sacred shrine has become a regular destination for us.

Each visit deepened my curiosity about this fascinating place. Living in the bustling city of Jammu, finding such a peaceful retreat felt like a blessing. Our knowledge about the temple's history was limited, and it was clear that this extraordinary site had no widely available documentation.

A significant figure in my journey was Mrs. Reeta Gupta, my mother, role model and inspiration behind this research. Driven by her commitment to understanding the temple's history and the goddess Mahamaya, Mrs. Gupta sought answers from the temple pandits and local elders but found no published material. Her quest motivated me to research and compile a comprehensive account of the temple's history in the form of a book.

My mother, who not only inspired but also translated the work into Hindi, deserves special mention here. Her devotion to Goddess Mahamaya was evident in her tireless work and the bhajans she composed. I am deeply grateful for her contribution, which made the book accessible for readers in both Hindi and English.

The idea of documenting the temple's history came from my parents, who provided both inspiration and resources. They often shared stories about the temple and its surroundings. While I could recount these tales, I sought confirmation from

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reliable sources.

My search led me to Prof. V. K. Sharma, a dedicated mentor who greatly contributed to this project. His expertise in Jammu and Kashmir's history, especially the cultural history of Bahu Fort and its vicinity, was invaluable. Prof. Sharma's guidance transformed my research into a cohesive narrative, and his support was crucial throughout the process.

Pandit Subhash Sharma, who verified the authenticity of our findings, played a vital role. His family, including his father Shree Fagat Ram and grandfather Shree Bhag Mal, has long served as the temple's custodians. Their dedication has made the temple a renowned site in the Jammu region.

The research explores various aspects of the temple's significance, including its religious, natural, and cultural dimensions. Jammu, known as the "City of Faith," has a deep-rooted reverence for female deities. The Mahamaya Temple, situated amidst the Trikuta Mountains, shares this sacred status with other local deities like Mata Vaishno Devi and Mata Bawe wali. The Mahamaya Temple's history is intertwined with that of the ancient kingdom of Dharanagri. According to the eminent writer, Vishwanath Khajuria, this temple is linked to the Dharanagri described in Kalidas's "Meghdoot." Dharanagri was a prosperous kingdom under King Vikramjeet, but its downfall came with the rise of a corrupt successor. The kingdom was destroyed by an earthquake, yet the sacred stone of Goddess Mahamaya remained protected.

The legend of the Mahamaya Temple recounts a period when Maharaja Ranbir Singh, seeking a cure for his ailing son, was guided by a dream to discover the deity's resting place. Following the goddess's directions, a small temple was built, and the king's son recovered. This event solidified the temple's significance, leading to its continued reverence.

Jammu 'The City of Faith'

Jammu is known as the "city of faith", a location that represents the strength of women. Shakti's central concept may have evolved from Jammu's strong beliefs in women power.

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The Trikuta Mountains provide protection for the Jammu region and an abode to many goddesses, including Goddess Mata Vaishno Devi (Katra), Goddess Mata Bawewali (Bahu Fort), Goddess KolKandoli Mata (Nagrota), Goddess Sukrala Mata (Billawar), Goddess Deva Mai (Katra), Goddess Sheetla Devi (Jammu), Goddess Sarthal Mata (Kishtwar), Goddess Chandi Mata (Paddar), and many other deities. The goddess in the Mahamaya Temple is believed to have power over a particular part of the Jammu region and is given the same protective status as other female deities.

The Jammu region is also known for its various attractive shrines dedicated to local deities, many of whom are women and girls who are worshipped as Daatis or Kuldevis (the word kuldevi is derived from two words: kula, meaning clan, and devi, meaning goddess, referring to the ancestral deities that are worshipped by particular clans).

The practice of Kanya Pujan is the acknowledgement of "Shakti." In the Jammu region, every minor girl is respected and worshipped as a form of mother goddess called Kanjak. They are never allowed to touch feet or bow down in front of elders; rather, there is a ritual to touch the young girls' feet before performing traditional functions, pooja, auspicious activities, or any good deed.

During Navratri, there is a special puja known as "Kanya pujan" where girls are worshipped and offered sweets and food (Puri, halwa, and chole/black chickpeas), and local residents offering prayers wash their feet, tie thread (mauli) on their wrists, and offer them their favourite things along with some amount of money (dakshana) out of respect.

The roots of Shakti within the diverse traditions of Jammu are still unknown. It is impossible to put a date on when their worship began. Generally, the worship of the mother goddess was accepted in the 9th century, but its emergence is still hidden.

From a traditional perspective, Jammu finds the presence of practically every goddess in the form of traditional temples all over the Jammu and Kashmir region. Traditional stories,

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folklore, and sculpture— rare evidence of distinctive ideologies—are treasured here. But there are no ways to describe their origin. They seem more supernatural, residing beyond the existence of humans.

The goddess Mahamaya appears in many traditional religious books, one of which is Durga Sapthshati. On one of the seals, we find a dedicated chapter on her emergence, elegance, and existence. The very first adhyaae (chapter) highlights her emergence and existence with respect to a purpose to bring peace and harmony to society. Durga Saptashati is among the loftiest of puranic compositions and is a part of the Markandeya Purana (one of the 18 oldest Mahapuranas).

The early history of Indian temples remains a highly contentious field of study, where there are more questions than answers. Many pieces of the past are irretrievably lost, and attempts to form a comprehensive picture are complicated by ethnic and religious feelings and the legacy of pioneering.

This book unquestionably serves as a link between Jammu's crumbling past and its ambiguous future for the next generation. This book will serve the purpose of connecting us with our ancestors' experiences. Jammu is renowned as the "City of Temples" because of its numerous majestic shrines. But the objective of this book is to inspire the next generation to take a close look at one of the most amazing shrines that is currently strengthening the prestige of the Jammu region of Jammu and Kashmir.

Mahamaya Temple, Jammu

The Mahamaya Temple is a distinctive structure with a fascinating history. It is located behind the magnificent Bahu Fort and looks over the majestic Tawi River. In contrast to most temples in India, this splendid structure was made in honour of Mahamaya Devi, a local deity of the Dogra community. Throughout the year, this temple draws a large number of devotees who come to pay their respects to the great female entity.

Goddess Mahamaya White Temple

The white-topped beauty stands in attractive contrast to the

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majestic blue sky and the Trikuta mountain ranges in the distance. It is surrounded by lush green forests. One may see a beautiful panoramic view of Jammu, which is 5 kilometres away from this location.

The ancient statue (Pindi) of the deity is the main attraction of the shrine. If one goes to this old shrine, one finds, usually, the goddess depicted in a rock (Pindi) in the shape of a shield covered with saffron coloured Vermilion (Sindoor). There are gold eyes placed on top of the pindi, a big silver umbrella on the head known as a chattar, and a silver crown on the goddess's forehead. A traditional nose pin known as Nath shines on the nose, and gold necklaces are worn around the neck. The goddess is covered with beautiful, brightly coloured dupattas and with countless garlands and flowers as well. She has been adorned with traditional ornaments of the Jammu Dogra community.

Visitors also appreciate the peace and quiet surroundings that this mountain offers them.

This temple, known as the Mahamaya temple of the mother goddess "Mahamaya," is located on a hillock in Jammu adjacent to a lovely park also known as Mahamaya Park and may be seen from several locations in the city.

This is close to the Bawe wali Mata Temple at Bahu Fort, which is on another hill; however, getting from one temple to the other on foot requires descending, then walking, and then ascending another one. The road also connects both temples. However, one must have a private vehicle because there is no public transportation available to visit the temple, which is located at a short distance from Narwal Bala on the left side of the Kunjwani-Nagrota national highway.

The Kingdom of Ancient Dharanagri

A kingdom called "Dharanagari" is believed to have existed before the existence of Jammu city, including the settlements close to the current Bahu fort and the area of Mahamaya. The Mahamaya Temple is a peculiar structure with a fascinating history. It is located behind the magnificent Bahu Fort and looks

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over the silently flowing Tawi River.

According to the eminent writer Vishwanath Khajuria, this is the same Dharanagari in which the poet Kalidasa chanted "Meghdoot." Despite the fact that Dharanagari is a common place name in India, the facts must be ascertained based on this hint since the folktales of historical monarchs like Raja Bhoj and Vikramaditya, etc., which are common in Jammu's popular culture, can aid in determining whether this Dharanagari was the actual Dharanagari of Kalidas or not.

The Dharanagri Kingdom (also referred to as the "regal period of ancient Jammu") was the earliest period of Jammu territory, when it was ruled by the king named Vikramjeet. According to oral accounts, the Dharanagri Kingdom was founded with settlements near the snow-capped hills and the cleanest river flowing nearby. The country was abundant in all kinds of resources and opportunities. The king, Vikramjeet, was ruling every heart. His glorious kingdom was flourishing under his mentorship. His heroism was widely disseminated, and it was solidifying the existence of Dharanagri. The majority of the land was suitable for cultivation for the people of this Dharanagri tribe.

There was a sufficient supply of food and clothing, and the area was favourably developing.

After the death of the king of Dharanagri, Vikramajeet, his son succeeded to the throne, but he quickly established himself as a weak and corrupt leader.

He treated elders with disrespect, instilled harshness in his people, alienated a lot of workers, and even his minister's daughter was not spared from his wrong deeds. When the minister vehemently objected, he was slain, and his home was set on fire. It is claimed that as a result of his pervasive nasty behaviour, people began denouncing him for his cruelty, and in his court it was proclaimed that his kingdom would soon be destroyed by his own horrendous acts because one day soon he would have to repay the debts owed to all those who had suffered, followed by the curse of disrespecting daughters.

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Everything, including resources, people, buildings, livelihoods, and the name and prestige of the entire kingdom, was quickly devastated by a tremendous earthquake.

An earthquake—the shaking of the surface of the earth—suddenly destroyed the area; the city of Dharanagri was buried, and the debris was swept away by the holy water that surrounded it.

It is believed that the sacred stone (Pindi) of the local deity "Mahamaya" remained protected on the hilltop, hidden beneath a heap of sand and stones, which continued to guard the entire territory.

Folk psychology claims that the deity of this dehri (a very small temple constructed and dedicated to a local or family deity) was Goddess Mahamaya, who was believed to be an agony of death for the sinners. Despite a devastating earthquake that destroyed everything, it is believed that it could not erase the existence of Goddess Mahamaya.

The Legend of Mahamaya Temple

A few references to this state of Dharanagri and the shrine's presence at the same location have been claimed to be unearthed, despite the lack of concrete evidence. a lovely state that once thrived on the hill on the left side of the Tawi river some thousands of years ago.

This is believed to have unfolded when Maharaja Ranbir Singh was in possession of the state of Jammu and Kashmir. His son reportedly fell ill abruptly due to an unidentified illness. Every medical professional failed to diagnose and treat the patient's ailment. It is said that one night he had a dream in which the Goddess questioned him about how he could comfortably sleep in a region where the local deity was residing without a roof over her head. The goddess ordered him to try finding her place and create a shelter or temple for her. She then revealed the location to him.

It is believed that the very next day, Maharaja Ranbir Singh gave his troops the command to search that particular hill surrounded by a jungle for the existence of the deity. They re-

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ported to Maharaja Ranbir Singh that they had been unable to locate anything.

Still unrecognised the next day, the goddess appeared in his dream again and instructed the ruler to be serious about exploration. The following day, Maharaja Ranbir Singh joined the search, and with the help and guidance of a small girl (Kanjak), they discovered a heap of stones and sand beneath which a pindi (a type of naturally occurring stone worshipped as a deity) was found. They then established a small temple over the same hill and at the same location, with the assistance of pandits and purohits.

Fortunately, his son recovered from the undiagnosed disease the same day and was thought to be in excellent health thereafter.

Since that time, and even after, the royal families have maintained their belief in Goddess Mahamaya. Initially, only royal families used to visit Mahamaya'sDehri (a very small temple constructed and dedicated to a local or family deity). As time went on, Goddess Mahamaya came to be seen as the deity of all people and began to be worshipped by all. Devotees offer roasted black chickpeas (roasted chana) and jaggery in the temple dedicated to Goddess Mahamaya.

The temple underwent necessary repairs in the period of Maharaja Ranbir Singh's administration (1857 to 1880), but no significant modifications or improvements to the temple were done.

From the outset, the people had faith in Mahamaya Devi, which they continue to do now. Mahamaya Devi was similarly portrayed by certain elderly, wise people as a form of Goddess Durga. It is also believed that her other sisters, Nav Durga (the Nine Deities), are enshrined in the same temple.

On auspicious Navratra days, you can visit this place to feel the festive atmosphere. It is also accessible every day throughout the year but during the holidays of Lohri or Makara Sankranti, Ram Navami, and Deepavali it glows with extended decorations all around when the entire city is filled with enthusiasm

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and celebrations.

Although a considerable number of people attend the temple every day, the crowds are heavier on Sunday, Tuesday and during Navratras. Daily pilgrimages to the shrine are still made by the devoted, and Bhandara is also organised occasionally.

This picture the Mahamaya temple is of the late 1970s, when there was nothing around except lush green forest. (Picture Courtesy Prof. V. K. Sharma)

From this picture, we can see that the temple was not a huge construction at that time and was a very small construction in the form of a small temple (Dehri). Even though it was impossible for a single person to stand comfortably, this Dehri (a very small temple constructed and dedicated to a local or family deity) was standing on rocks, huge stones, and sand.

At that time, this location was home to a little, antiquated temple containing the idol (Pindi) of Mahamaya, which was so small that even someone of average height had trouble standing within. The old temple, however, was replaced by a new, enormous building in the following years, but the original idol was left intact. Despite the visitors' strong faith in this shrine, very few of them are familiar with its past.

This temple is among the oldest in the Jammu region, according to Pandit Subhash Sharma ji. He related numerous mystical truths connected with the temple that locals, the army stationed nearby, and the pujaris themselves have personally witnessed. He also related numerous old stories about the temple.

He recounted a story about his great-grandfather, who served as a pujari in this temple during the reign of the Jammu rulers. According to him, the ruling kings used to come to this temple for Goddess Mahamaya's blessings during festivals and other special occasions. Kings had a deep belief in the goddess Mahamaya and considered it fortunate to attend her supreme observance without fail. In order to reach this temple, they used to ride boats or palkis to cross the Tawi River. Roads hadn't yet been built at that point. Also, there was a thick forest all around.

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He also narrated an incident in which the Royal Family used to present the deity with pudding (Kada in Dogri or Halwa in Hindi) made of semolina, pure clarified butter (ghee), and sugar. He claimed that halwa used to be brought from the royal fort to the temple on a bhaggi (a cart used to convey members of the royal family). It is believed that the goddess Mahamaya was offered the sweet halwa as bhog and prasad since ancient times.

He also added that his great-grandfather had built small slopes to make it easier for guests (royal families) to reach the temple when there were no routes and a dense forest all around. His forefathers personally used to cut down trees, bushes, and shrubs to make a slope, then lay stones on the slope to make it easier for the royal families to access. The locals referred to these slopes as "takki."

Yet, during the succeeding centuries, Jammu's population steadily increased. The kings of Jammu gained more power. With the end of the Dogra kingdom, Jammu came to be governed by the Jammu and Kashmir administration.

Shri Jagmohan, the former Governor of J&K is credited with bringing more recognition to this most revered Hindu shrine, the "Mata Mahamaya Temple." He made dedicated efforts to uplift and expand this temple, which attracted many developments in the adjoining forest.

He gave the adjoining forest a name, Mahamaya Forest, that continues to provide connectivity to the shrine, and the forest was also developed to facilitate pilgrims and enhance its utility. Shri Jagmohan has proven to be the greatest supporter in highlighting this sacred shrine. During his tenure, efforts were made for the convenience of the pilgrims to reach the temple and a good connecting path was constructed.

"Mahamaya Forest not only acts as green lungs for the Jammu city but also is an essential sight-seeing facility for the people." The typical subtropical climate of the area with four distinct seasons (spring (February–March), summer (April–June), monsoon (July– September), and winter (November–January)

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is an add-on booster for variety of plantations, herbs, vegetation, flowerings, etc.

Mahamaya Forest Stretch, the only existing "city forest" area in Jammu, a typical subtropical mixed patch of deciduous forest and exotic plantations along the left bank of the river Tawi, is a favourite destination birds, and one can frequently see many resident birds and peacocks there.

The Bahu-Mahamaya forest mostly harboured forest specialists. This urban forest area attracts a large number of migratory as well as resident birds. The forest fragments, tree-lined avenues and residential yards harbour more bird species. Many wild animals, like foxes, leopards, Nilgai, etc., are part of this forest.

These natural habitats in the urban matrix serve as refuges for forest species, increase abundant food resources, and provide nesting opportunities, including burrows.

Mahamaya Park

The Mahamaya park here could be one of the major attractions for the people of Jammu during the morning hours. "Such parks not only act as green lungs for the cities but are very essential for recreation for the people." This park is connected by long tiled pathway from the main temple.

Development and growth

Since the introduction of the Gandola from Peer Khoh to Bahu Fort via the Mahamaya Hill, this location has grown in popularity with tourists. Visitors and pilgrims can get to the temple on the tiled track in just five to ten minutes from a Ropeway station in this park.

The 1.66-kilometer-long cable car service has two sections. The first section is from Peer Kho to the Mahamaya temple and goes over the Tawi river. The second section is from the Mahamaya temple to the Bahu Fort. The cable car project provides people with an international standard experience and transportation facility, connecting important tourist sights, providing a beautiful and picturesque view of the River Tawi and the numerous temples situated on both banks of the River

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Tawi. The ropeway has been built on difficult terrain from the riverbed to the Mayamaya temple station.

Devotees visiting the hilltop Mahamaya temple in the temple city of Jammu will now be able to visit the shrine of Mata Vaishno Devi at TrikutaParvat in Katra from there.

To further enrich the experience, a telescope will soon be installed at the temple premises, allowing visitors and devotees to catch a distant yet divine glimpse of the Mata Vaishno Devi shrine at Trikuta Parvat in Katra. It will also offer panoramic views of Adhkuwari, Sanjichhat, Mubarak Mandi, Bahu Fort, Amar Mahal, the Old City, Pirkhoh Temple, Manda, Panjpir, Pad Devta, and other landmarks rooted in Dogra heritage. Amidst this modern development, the Mahamaya Temple continues to stand out for its profound historical, religious, cultural, and natural significance.

Footnotes

1. Pindi: the ancient statue of the deity in the form of a rock.
2. Dehri: A very small temple constructed and dedicated to a local or family deity.
3. Bhaggi: it is a cart used to convey members of the royal family.
4. Kuldevi: The word kuldevi is derived from two words: kula, meaning clan, and devi, meaning goddess, and refers to the ancestral deities that are worshipped by particular clans.
5. Kanjak: the worship of young girls in the form of a mother goddess.
6. Bahu Fort: Bahu Fort is a historic fort in the city of Jammu, Jammu and Kashmir. Constructed on the banks of the Tawi River, the ancient fort is believed to have been constructed by BahuLochan, brother of the traditional founder of Jammu. The fort is a religious place, and within its precincts is a temple dedicated to the Hindu goddess Kali. The temple is known locally as the "BaweWali Mata temple."
7. Tawi River: The Tawi is a river that flows through the city of Jammu and is a major left-bank tributary of the Chenab. The Tawi River is considered sacred and holy.

(The author, a noted writer, poet and researcher, is based in Jammu.)

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Art in Kashmir

Some reminiscences

Triloke Kaul

As a co-founder (with late S.N.Butt and late P.N.Kachru being the other significant names) of the Progressive Artists' Association, Triloke Kaul has been the main organizer throughout as its Honorary General Secretary. After the Independence in 1947, partition and tribal raids on Kashmir a cultural upheaval had sprung alongside the political resistance. As a consequence some painters also surfaced. Apart from what happened in the Cultural Front, a semi-political leftist resistance movement backed by a Militia Wing, the presence in Srinagar of a young apolitical artist, Syed Haider Raza, from Bombay was more or less sensational. He would be seen everywhere - on roadside, on river banks, under bridgelets over waterways, painting large watercolours depicting not the usual pretty stuff but murky landscape and turbulent life of deep interiors. Two local painters, Butt and Kaul, had come in close contact with him and, after initial disapproval of his strange style and manner (which today is so commonly acceptable as impressionist), were greatly influenced. The three closely worked together during the brief period Raza was in Kashmir, and thus Butt and Kaul got gradually initiated into Modern Art and works of world masters. An exhibition of the paintings of Raza, a couple of artists from Punjab and a number of local painters including Butt, Kaul, Kachru, Fida Hasnain and a resident foreigner, Edna Bellefontaine, was put up in June 1948 at Mujahid Manzil, Srinagar under the auspices of Progressive Artists' Association. Thousands witnessed the exhibition which laid the foundations of an art movement in Kashmir.

The Art Movement, under Progressive Artists' Association, strove to create an art-consciousness amongst the local intelli-

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gentsia of the period and a general awareness of contemporary international trends in art through exhibitions, on-spot collective paintings at festivals and fairs, conferences and weekly meetings. These meetings held for critical appraisal of works of the week, of member artists were attended without restriction by artists and non-artists, civil intellects and army personnel, locals and foreigners, "progressives" and "reactionaries" (common words in parlance then). The PAA worked in coordination with sister organizations of writers, musicians and theatre artistes led by Late Dinanath Nadim, Rahman Rahi, Somnath Zutshi, Mirza Arif Beg and in close liaison with the Radio luminaries like Premnath Pardesi, G.R. Nazki, Mohan Aima, Pushkar Bhan etc. towards a cultural renaissance in the state while maintaining fraternal relations with contemporary artists like S.H.Raza, K.H.Ara, M.F.Husain, F.N Souza, H.A.Gade of Progressive Artists' Group, Bombay; Bhabesh Sanyal, Dhanraj Bhagat, K.S.Kulkarni, Prannath Mago of Delhi, Silpi Chakra, New Delhi; Progressive Painters' Association, Madras led by K.C.S.Paniker; and Calcutta Group led by Prodoshdas Gupta. These pioneers of Modern Art Movement in the country soon formed the All India Association of Fine Arts, Bombay (with five zonal units) to which they remained affiliated, selecting Triloke Kaul as Honorary Secretary in charge of North Zone which included Jammu and Kashmir. A Travelling Print Exhibition of World Masters (50 Years - Impressionists and After) mounted by UNESCO went round the world. Responsibility of circulation in prime towns of India was handed over to AIAFA by the Central Government. By virtue of North Zone connection, Progressive Artists' Association set up the show at Nedous' Hotel Srinagar. This was a big boost to the local art movement in general, and highly educative to artist and allied communities in particular to be face-to-face with large original-like well-framed prints of masters like Picasso, Cezanne, Van Gogh, etc. This also provided enough inspiration to fresh aspirants. (Bansi Parimoo, Nisar Aziz and Umesh Kaul grouped as "Young Artists").

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An Art Conference was organized by the PAA on 18 September 1948 (Srinagar, Hadow's School) with messages pouring from all over the country, and blessings from Percy Brown, Dr Mulkraj Anand, Khwaja Ahmad Abbas, and reputed artists like N.S.Bendre, Shaivax Chavda, K.K.Hebbar etc. Triloke Kaul had resigned from brief service in the Chief Administrator's office at border town of Uri to be available on whole time basis to the PAA and the Art Movement, at great sacrifice (family prosperity had constantly been on decline and fast approaching penury conditions).

After a series of group shows locally, the Progressive Artists' Association exhibited in September 1949 in New Delhi (All India Fine Arts and Crafts Society) showing selected works of five original members of the Association i.e. S N Butt, Triloke Kaul, P N Kachru, Edna Bellefontaine, and Fida Hasnain, and a few others. This first-ever exhibit of Kashmir painters outside the State was well received with overwhelming Press reviews. Meanwhile Raza and his colleagues had declared that works of Butt and Kaul qualified to show in Bombay. A' two-man show was held under the auspices of the PAA Kashmir. The show was widely reviewed and acclaimed by leading critics. A columnist saw in S.N.Butt "a new star on Indian horizon'___ prophetic, as shortly same season of one of his paintings was awarded Gold Medal in an All India competition in Sholapur Bombay. The event, and reviews by well-known art critics on the two exhibitions created some kind of sensation back home in Srinagar. Following year in 1950 a broad-based show of State artists was held in Jammu by PAA at the initiative of late Dr Apurab Somnath, an outstanding intellectual of the Jammu region, with the objective of extending the movement to the winter capital. Same year a three-person show was put up in Lucknow comprising water colours of Butt, Kaul and (Mrs.) Gauri Pant who had spent some time with the duo in Kashmir. Such and other activities of the Association (original five members and the associates), and the enthusiasm behind the Movement, reminded late historian-educationist Percy Brown

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(who had settled for retirement in Kashmir) of "the Pre-Raphaelites of Great Britain". Another international authority Dr. Hermann Goetz, inaugurating a PAA show in Srinagar in1951 or so felt "600 years of void being bridged" in the valley of Kashmir. Prof. Goetz, who was then the Director/ Curator of the Baroda Museum and Picture Gallery, had selected and purchased a few paintings for the Museum. This had provided a big boost to local artists.

H.A.Gade, a co-founder of Progressive Group of Bombay, inspired by earlier 1948-visit of his colleague, Raza, visited Kashmir in 1951 (or so), on a painting mission. Triloke Kaul stayed with him and both together would work on-spot moving from place to place. On an occasion a person pursued them everywhere all through the day, intently watching them work morning till evening and, at the end of the day, introducing himself as a painter seeking guidance. In a few days, his earlier works were seen in a weekly meeting and admitted to the PAA. His close association with Butt and Kaul was an identical repeat of theirs in 1948 with Raza but, after Triloke Kaul went away in 1952 for a long systematic schooling, he remained attached to S.N.Butt till ultimately in 1955-56 he got a Govt. of India scholarship for a two-year period to study under a guru. The guru was Prof. N.S.Bendre, and the scholar was G.R.Santosh, who was later to be one of the leading contemporary artists of the country.

As far back as the Art Conference of 1948, the PAA had engineered the idea of a school of art in Kashmir. In fact, the assistance of a patron Prof Percy Brown (formerly Principal Calcutta School of Art) had been sought and a detailed plan was drawn up. To have trained faculty, Triloke Kaul was the only one to offer and opt for a systematic schooling. Despite Dr. Mulkraj Anand obtaining consent and assurance of S.M.Abdullah, head of the J&K government then, to the deputation of Triloke Kaul for studies in mural art at Mexico, the proposal fell through at the bureaucratic level leaving no alternative but to do it on one's own. Baroda College of Fine

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Arts was the next choice to study under Prof Bendre (a colleague and a great teacher). Earn-and-learn, in trying circumstances at advanced age - that is how it was. The long course was ultimately completed, to be the first from J&K to graduate in Fine Arts (apart from Dr. Ratan Parimoo who later settled in Baroda). Contact remained active throughout with PAA back home, providing guidance and new experiences. Santosh came to Baroda in 1955-56. Soon a five-man group comprising N.S.Bendre, Triloke Kaul, Jyoti Bhatt, Shanti Dave and G.R.Santosh exhibited in Bombay. The famous Baroda Group was thus founded, and the next showing a year later included more artists to from a bigger group.

Srinagar witnessed a solo exhibition of paintings (Nedous' Hotel) in 1952 followed by two others in '53 and '54 by Triloke Kaul. These were the first ever one-man-shows by any local artist in Kashmir. His was also the first one-man-show by a J&K artist outside the State (Bombay 1952 Jehangir Art Gallery), followed by similar showings at Baroda (1952, Museum), New Delhi (1953, Freemasons' Hall and 1955, AIFACS Galleries). Half-a-dozen or more solos before any other local artist ventured to show singly till the sixties. In 1956 India Exhibition mounted by the Central Govt to tour eight East-European countries included some works of Triloke Kaul, thus being the first from a Kashmiri to be shown abroad.

Meanwhile Dr. Mulkraj Anand, editor MARG Bombay had been gathering material for a special Issue of his famous art-magazine on Kashmir. V.R.Khajuria, a young painter working in Dogra Art Gallery, Jammu (housing precious collection of Basohli miniatures), and a find of Dr. Anand who advised him of Triloke-example, was closing in on a group of Jammu artists. Another promise from Kashmir, Kishori Kaul, taking regular tuitions from S.N.Butt, was in the news. Both looked for opportunity to study at Baroda. After eight long years of stay there, she completed her post-graduate specialization in Fine Arts. Khajuria graduated specializing in sculpture to be the first sculptor from J&K, as was Kishori the first female

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artist from J&K to achieve wide recognition at the national level. While Santosh and Kaul were the earliest recipients of the National Academy Awards at least 20 years ahead of any other from the State, Kishori and Khajuria were the next to be awarded in 1981 and 1982 respectively.

In 1956-57, Triloke Kaul mooted the idea of replacing the PAA by a more broad-based non-commercial and non-political Kashmir Art Society, sensing interference from certain quarters in the prevalent cultural movement, of which the PAA was a constituent unit. The meeting was attended by Butt, Kachru, Santosh, Kishori, Bansi Parimoo, Nisar Aziz etc. The new Society started with a purely art-promotional Children Art Competition, followed by a larger exhibition of State artists (Tourist Reception Centre, Srinagar). Govt. acquired a painting each from the exhibitors, also commissioning Santosh to decorate the Tourist Reception Hall with murals.

Santosh, attached to a private gallery in New Delhi, frequently moved between Srinagar and outside, ultimately to settle permanently in New Delhi. He contributed greatly as liaison between Central and State activities, organizing art camps in the valley of known artists outside, thus building an important collection for the J&K Academy of Art, Culture & Languages, and also in creation of two Institutes of Music and Fine Arts under J&K Academy of Art, Culture & Languages in Srinagar and Jammu.

Triloke Kaul found a job as Director/ Chief Designer of School of Designs (under a scheme for research and development of State handicrafts) set up jointly by the All India Handicrafts Board and the State Government at Srinagar with branches in Jammu and Leh. He worked on the post for 23 years till retirement. He carried on with his normal art practice simultaneously, and was even elected from the National Constituency to the Lalit Kala Akadami (National Academy of Art, New Delhi) on its Executive Board for a four-year term in the seventies.

Inspired by reputation, contribution and recognition (and suc-

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cess-stories assuring of career-prospects in art) that Santosh and Kaul - by now icons among younger ones - had achieved, many others opted for training in Baroda and elsewhere for art as a career. We now have a rich crop of painters and sculptors in both regions of J&K. Besides Santosh, Kaul, Kishori and Khajuria, half-a-dozen or more recipients of the Award have added to the list, - among them Bhushen Koul, Rajinder Tiku (also an international awardee), Ravinder Jamwal, Veer Munshi, Suman Gupta etc.

That is the story then. Few of the present generation artists know how it all happened. Still younger ones may never know of the accidental spark of 1948 that did it all.

It is gratifying that the government of Jammu and Kashmir finally honoured Syed Haider Raza, at a function in New Delhi in 2012 for his 'Kashmir connection'.

(The paper is based on reminiscences the celebrated artist shared on email with his friends.)

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Pran Nath Butt

An Unknown Artist from Kashmir

Avtar Mota

('A Watercolour' by Pran Nath Butt in author's house)

I came across Pran Nath in Purkhoo tented accommodation (for Kashmiri Migrants). He was illiterate, unable to express himself, extremely poor and survived only on government relief and ration. He smoked Beedis as cigarettes were beyond his reach.

"Late S N Butt (artist) was my uncle. I am from the Badiyar area of the Butt clan. I was a runner with Dwarka And Co, Chemists, Budshaw Chowk,, Srinagar. I have no money for paper, colours and brushes. I want to paint. I also knew Mohan Raina artist. He would give me some financial support apart from some paper and colours. I have not performed the Kaah Nethar ceremony for my newborn children. What to do? I am a worthless man."

This is what he told me outside his tent in 1995. I was working as manager of our bank's Dumana branch. And then we gave him a loan of 5000 rupees. After about a week I again visited Purkhoo camp of Kashmiri Migrants and met the leaders of the camp. A leader, Dwarka Nath by name came closer to me and started shouting:

"Has bank started financing Kaah Nethar ceremony also? We will tell Lone Sahib (the then Relief Commissioner who was helpful to Kashmiri Migrants.) to take action against all."

I came to know that Pran Nath had bought watercolours, brushes and drawing paper for about 2000 rupees and spent the rest amount on the Kaah-Nethar ceremony of his children. The leaders who complained me had also enjoyed a sumptuous meal with fish, cooked in Kashmiri style inside his tent. To me, Pran Nath admitted everything and also revealed having bought

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a saree for his wife for Kaah Nethar out of the loan amount. After about 10 days, Pran Nath came to the bank with a bundle of about 15 Kashmir sceneries done in watercolour. The first that was shown to me was Rainawari's Naidyar Bridge.

"How much for this?"

"This is all yours. Nothing sir."

I thought for a moment and then told him:-

"I will pay 700 rupees. But this money will go into your loan account."

Maj Gen Wahi (Retd.) who lived at Barnai during those days and was a respected customer of the bank, was also in my chamber at that moment. He felt interested in the man and his work. He also bought one or two watercolours. I paid Pran Nath 400 rupees and the rest of the money was deposited in his loan account. I asked him to keep 5 watercolours with me. The next day, my boss Mr RIS Sidhu (he retired as Chief General Manager of the bank) visited the branch for inspection. He was a connoisseur of fine arts and an honest and upright officer. He bought one that depicted Dal Lake and Shikara. The remaining four were bought by my relations and the money so collected was deposited in his loan account. Within a period of about two or three months, the entire loan amount with interest was repaid under this arrangement. Later, every fortnight, Pran Nath would come with 5 watercolours that I would pass on to my friends and relations for Rs 600 or Rs 700 per watercolour. Once the loan was adjusted, the sale proceeds would be deposited in his savings bank account. I introduced him to some schools (to be employed as a drawing teacher) but because of his language and total lack of communication skills, he could not adjust himself beyond one month at any place. He spoke only Kashmiri. A sample of his lingo:

"Iss ko tapaali. Ye zudd mondu hai. Yeh drawing nahin hechhegaa"

"Hum ayaalbaar hai. Tankhaah waqtas pyath deita. Teel tomul khatam."

"Idhar Jammu garma traeth, naar, dumm ta gumma. Hum

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mar gayaa. Hamaara Kashmir fiza"

After my transfer from Dumana, I lost contact with him. In 2004, I headed the Rehari Chowk branch and one day he appeared all of a sudden. He came with 5 watercolours and wanted them to be sold for 5000 rupees. I suggested to meet some good customers and he got what he wanted. I also gathered that he was educating his children and had also got addicted to liquor. At the Rehari Chowk office, I think I also requested Maj Gen Goverdhan Singh Jamwal Retired (PVSM) to help him out in the sale of his watercolours. I also requested Dr Dara Singh's brother (who owned a Petrol Pump) to buy his watercolours. Mrs Gayatri Jamwal (Daughter of Capt Dewan Singh Ex. ADC to Maharaja Hari Singh) was also requested to help him out. She was a VIP customer of that branch and spoke fluent Kashmiri.

And then one day I came to know that Pran Nath had breathed his last due to some incurable liver disease. I felt very bad.

Ramesh Kumar Butt, my colleague and son of the late S N Butt (well-known artist) confirmed later that Pran Nath was from their clan. He also confirmed many other things that Pran Nath had conveyed to me. Everything that Pran Nath had spoken to me turned out true on my cross-checking. The painting hanging in my living room brings forth many interesting anecdotes about this simple, poor and shy man.

(Kaah-Nethar is the purification ceremony after childbirth. It is performed on the eleventh day after delivery when the mother left the confinement room. Before this, "Shraan Sonder" or the post-delivery bath ceremony was also performed. On Kaah Nethar day, relations were invited for a sumptuous meal. New clothes were also given to the mother of the child. Many Kashmiri Pandits still perform the Kaah-Nethar ceremony that used to be performed without fail in every household. In Hindu SAMASKARAS, Kaah Nethar is knowñ as Jatakarma or Birth Ceremony.)

(The author, a celebrate blogger and writer, is presently based in Jammu.)

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Lall Ded's Vakh

A study in European connections

Shamshad Kralwari

VAPNA HRiD VELTA NADI ,
vahp-nah hreed vel-tah nah-dee
VAEGDARLOUS FEIGUM HOUSI,
Vayg-dar-lows fay-gum how-see
HILMIR LET HOGGUM MAETA,
Hil-meer let hog-gum mytah
HERSA KLETT BANA VERDANT,
Heh-rah klet bah-nah var-dant

Lall Ded's poetry has been extensively analyzed, with most scholars interpreting her work through their personal lense—whether depicting her as a staunch Yogini or a devout Muslim. This speaks volumes about the universal appeal of her poetry, making her a revered "Ded" (grandmother) for both Hindus and Muslims. However, she remains an underexplored poetess of profound experiences. As Prof Rahi observes, "to truly grasp the essence of Lall Ded's poetry, one must analyze her unique expression, which has been largely overlooked." Prof. Bashar Bashir adds that a poet's work should be critically examined to determine whether it reflects inner experiences or moments in time.

Dr. T.N. Ganjoo expresses disappointment over the lack of in-depth research in Kashmiri literature, emphasizing that Lall Ded has not been viewed with a broad vision, and what has been written on her often repeats the same perspectives tailored to author's views.

Known as Lalleshveri and Lall Moj, Lall Ded is a pivotal figure in Kashmiri literature and language. Her poetry is a rich tapestry woven from diverse cultural, spiritual, and philosophical influences, shaped by the political and religious upheavals of

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her time. While her poetry is undoubtedly a cornerstone of present-day Kashmiri literature, scholars agree that Lall Ded's work represents the pinnacle of an era rather than the foundation of the literature. As learned scholar T.N. Raina notes, Lall Ded's Vaakhs clearly signify the evolution of our language.

Prof Jaya Lal Koul, a distinguished scholar and notable contributor to Kashmiri literature, known for his works Studies in Kashmiri and Lal Ded, writes: "... (I)n the absence of all external evidence, we have to fall back upon the internal evidence of the text itself, whatever its probative force. There are no allusions or references in Lalla Vaakh to contemporary events or to any events that can be firmly dated."

For such a study, the foremost requirement is to understand the etymology of the words, which is vital in comprehending the depth and richness of the poetry. Etymology provides insights into the historical and cultural contexts of words, revealing layered meanings and enhancing the symbolic and imagistic value of a poet's language. By uncovering the roots and evolution of words, etymology helps readers appreciate the phonetic resonance and intertextual references that poets often employ. This understanding enriches the reader's experience, allowing for a deeper connection with the poet's artistic expression and the era in which they wrote.

Prof Shafi Shouq in his work Kashri Aḍbuk Tawareikh, while following his predecessors, writes that the origin of the word "Vaakh" is the Sanskrit word "Vaakyani." The etymology traces back to Proto-Indo-Iranian "waks" (speech, voice) from Proto-Indo-European "wokws" (speech, voice), from "wekw" (to speak), cognate with Avestan "vaxs," Ancient Greek, Latin "vox," Persian "avaz," and English "voice" (via Latin and Old French). While it has 25 definitions, none cover the currents and undercurrents of Lalla's "Vaakhs."

Sanskrit poetry has a rich tradition of poetic forms and genres, such as Shloks, Sutras, and Stotras, but "Vaakh" as a distinct term is unique to Kashmiri mystic poetry in the sub-continent. The Sanskrit language, despite its vast history, remained con-

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fined to rulers, elites and monks for centuries. It was never the common man's language, and historical references indicate that if a person from the lower strata of society ever tried to speak in Sanskrit, they were admonished as this language was considered "Dev-bhasha" made by the gods for the high strata only. Lall Ded's language is not Dev-bhasha and is for all. Dr. T.N. Ganjoo, in his paper "Shivamat te Qadeem Shaeri," writes that delving deep into this issue reveals surprising roots that emerge from elsewhere. Prof. Rahi has written that Dina Nath Nadim once expressed that "Vaakh" might have some relationship with Roman Oracles. Moti Lal Saki suggests that while Lalla was well-rooted, her poetry's roots may emerge from somewhere else.

Considering this background and the etymology to ascertain parallels of "Vaakh, this paper adopts the principle of comparing sister languages in the Indo-European Language group to find out the tradition of this genre of verses, including Sanskrit, having a common ancestor. The comparison revealed fascinating insights into why the Kashmiri language and culture are considered unique.

In absence of any historical documentation, language and literature are crucial for understanding historical contexts as they provide a window into the cultural, social, and political life of a period. There is a rich tradition of Valk poetry in sister languages of Sanskrit but not in Sanskrit itself. The parallels between Lall Ded's "Vaakhs" in Norse "Valkyrie poetry" and "Sagas" of Germanic traditions, as well as the Albanian "Valk," are evident. Relationships are always seen through similarities in vocabulary, grammar, and syntax of different languages.

In Kashmiri, the word "Valk" is pronounced as Vaakh, with the 'L' sound dropped, similar to the silent 'L' in words from other languages, such as "calm" in English. This phonetic evolution reflects the natural linguistic shifts that occur over centuries and the specific phonetic developments in Kashmir.

Lall Ded's verses are revered for their spiritual wisdom and guidance, emphasizing divine truth and the pursuit of enlight-

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enment. For instance: "He is the name, He is the truth, He is the light, He is the word." In Afrikana, "Valk" (Falc) symbolizes vision and precision, a metaphor linked to Lall Ded's ability to perceive and articulate profound spiritual truths. For example: "The pot of my heart was boiling, and the sound of its bubbling was heard."

The shared Indo-European linguistic heritage provides a foundation for understanding the similarities between words like Vac (Sanskrit), Vaakh (Kashmiri), and Valk (Albanian), closely related to Valkyries (Norse) and "Walkure" (German). These connections underscore common themes of communication, expression, and spiritual wisdom across different cultures.

The Greek impact on Kashmiri life has been direct, as endorsed by Sir Mark Aurel Stein. Archaeological finds in Sinthan and Bijbehara validate chronicles highlighting Kashmir's connection to the Greek world. Lalla's poetry contains clues to this closeness. Terms present in the Vaakhs, categorized as authentic and not mutilated "by itinerant minstrels," as stated by Jaya Lal Koul in his monograph on "Lal Ded," include:

Zeus: the king of gods and supreme deity, protector and father figure of both gods and human.

Aagure: a king-priest of ancient Rome, maintaining religious and spiritual well-being of the state.

Hall: often referred to Valhalla in Norse mythology, where slain warriors chosen by Odin reside after death.

These terms have been overlooked in translations. Here are excerpts of Valk poetry from each culture, focusing on themes like bravery and crossing the often favourite themes of Lalla.

Afrikaans Text:

Ek het 'n huisie by die see,
'n plekkie om te wees,
waar ek kan droom en vry wees,
en die golwe my siel kan genee
(I have a little house by the sea,
a place to be,

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where I can dream and be free,
and the waves can heal my soul.)

Albanian Text:

Trimëria është si një det i trazuar,
që kërkon zemra të forta për ta kaluar,
me guxim dhe shpresë për të arritur,
në bregun tjetër, ku ëndrrat janë të vërt
(Bravery is like a stormy sea,
requiring strong hearts to cross,
with courage and hope to reach,
the other shore, where dreams are true.)

Old Norse:

Fara skal hver,
er á frama vill,
ok óvíst, hvar feigð várir,
en hugrinn skal sterk vera
(Everyone must travel,
who wants to advance,
and it is uncertain where death awaits,
but the mind must be strong.)

Germanic:

Hwæt! Wē Gār-Dena in geārdagum,
þēodcyninga, þrym gefrūnon,
hū·ðā æþelingas ellen fremedon,
oft Scyld Scēfing sceaþena þrēatum.
(Lo! We have heard of the glory of spear-danes
in the old days,
the kings of the people,
how those noblemen performed courageous deeds.)

Dutch text;

De zee roept, en ik antwoord,
met moed in mijn hart,
en de horizon als mijn gids,
vaar ik naar het onbekende
(The sea calls, and I answer,
with courage in my heart,

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and the horizon as my guide,
I sail into the unknown.)

These excerpts give a better sense of the meter and structure in each language.

Conclusion:

Lall Ded, a luminary of Kashmiri literature, stands as a testament to the rich tapestry of cultural and spiritual influences that shaped her era. Her Vaakhs, deeply rooted in the Shaivite tradition, also resonate with Sufi mysticism and Buddhist philosophy, reflecting a universal quest for truth and unity. The exploration of the etymology of Vaakh and its parallels with Valkyrie, Walküre, and similar terms in Afrikaner and Albanian traditions underscores the interconnectedness of human expression across cultures. This linguistic journey not only enriches our understanding of Lall Ded's work but also highlights the shared heritage of poetic and spiritual traditions worldwide.

Moreover, Lall Ded's use of terms like Zeus, Aagure, Hall, and Agard, related to Greek and Roman civilizations, further illustrates the closeness of Kashmiri culture with these ancient civilizations. This cross-cultural vocabulary in her poetry emphasizes the universal nature of her spiritual insights and the interconnectedness of human civilizations.

Lall Ded's verses transcend the confines of religious identity, advocating for a humanity that rises above the distinctions of Hindu and Muslim. Her poetry, a blend of personal struggle and profound spiritual insight, challenges orthodoxy and invites readers to seek inner purity and devotion. Despite the tendency to label her within narrow religious frameworks, her true legacy lies in her universal message of love, unity, and spiritual awakening.

By celebrating Lall Ded we honor a poet whose work continues to inspire and resonate, bridging divides and fostering a deeper appreciation of our shared human experience.

(The author, a renowned broadcaster, is a an ace writer and translator.)

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Sufiana Mousiqee of Kashmir

The mystique of the music

Dr Raja Waseem

Sufiana music, deeply rooted in the cultural fabric of Kashmir, presents a captivating musical narrative enriched with centuries-old traditions and influences. Originating from a diverse mosaic of Central Asian melodies, this enchanting genre resonates with the soul-stirring symphonies of the Santoor and the melodic enchantment of maqams. Sufiana music, with its harmonious fusion of ancient traditions, holds a significant influence on the vibrant cultural ethos of Kashmir.

The mesmerizing landscape of Kashmir serves as the cradle for the profound spiritual essence embodied within Sufiana Mousiqui. This musical heritage, interwoven with threads of cultural richness, reveals a captivating evolution. The Sufiana musical journey transcends mere musicality, embodying a cultural saga that has shaped Kashmir's unique musical heritage. It encompasses a rich tapestry woven from the mystique of Central Asian melodies, the rhythmic cadence of Arabian tunes, the soulful strains of Iranian compositions, and the enchanting rhythms of Samarkand and Tashkent. This amalgamation birthed the captivating Sufiana Kalam, a classical music form resonating uniquely within Kashmir's valleys.

Sufiana music's lexicon and vocabulary showcase the evolution of musical language, reflecting a cultural amalgamation that enriches the region's musical heritage. The dynamic cultural milieu of Jammu and Kashmir finds vibrant expression through its musical diversity, from the hauntingly beautiful strains of Sufiana music to the rhythmic folk melodies and traditional dance forms echoing through the valleys. Kashmir's melodies resonate closely with the Central Asian rhythms influencing its musical identity, while Jammu's tunes evoke the vibrant musical

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traditions of North India.

Sufiana Mousiqui: The Soulful Essence of Kashmir's Musical Heritage

Sufiana Mousiqui embodies the epitome of classical music, drawing inspiration from melodic modes known as maqams. These maqams, deeply rooted in traditional Arabic music, infuse Sufiana music with a timeless resonance that transcends cultural boundaries. At the heart of Sufiana Mousiqui lies the enchanting Santoor, a hundred-stringed instrument serving as the nucleus of Sufiana musical performances. The Santoor's ethereal notes weave a tapestry of emotions, creating a mesmerizing ambiance that captivates audiences and transports them to a realm of spiritual introspection.

The intricate interplay of maqams and Santoor melodies forms the backbone of Sufiana musical concerts, each performance a harmonious fusion of classical Arabic music and Kashmiri artistic expression. The deep-rooted traditions and refined techniques showcased in Sufiana Mousiqui reflect centuries of musical evolution and cultural exchange. Exploring the nuances of Sufiana Mousiqui unveils a world of musical intricacies, where each note carries profound meaning and each composition tells a unique story. The rhythmic cadence of maqams, intricately intertwined with the Santoor's celestial tones, creates an enchanting symphony resonating with the soul of Kashmir.

Gharana System of Sufiana Music

The Gharana system in Sufiana music plays a pivotal role in preserving and propagating this rich musical heritage. Prominent Gharanas such as the Saznawaz Gharana, Kamaal Bhat Gharana, the Ustaad Kaleenbaaf Family, the Ustaad Mohammad Abdullah Tibetbakaal family, and the Setari Gharana have significantly contributed to the evolution of Sufiana Mausiqui in Kashmir. Each Gharana brings a unique flavor and style to Sufiana music, showcasing the diverse range of musical expressions and techniques passed down through generations. The Saaznawaz Family, with its illustrious lineage of musicians and composers, stands as a cornerstone in this musical narrative,

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paving the way for the flourishing of Sufiana music in Kashmir.

Artists and Instruments in Sufiana Music

The realm of Sufiana music is adorned with renowned artists whose contributions have shaped its landscape. Artists like Ustaad Ghulam Mohammad Saznawaz, Ustaad Ghulam Mohammed Qaleenbaaf, Ustaad Mohammed Abdullah Tibetbaakaal, and Ustaad Kamaal Bhat have left an indelible mark on Sufiana music, showcasing mastery over vocal and instrumental renditions. Instruments such as the Santoor, Saaz-i-Kashmir, Dokra/Wasool/Tabla, and Setar are integral to Sufiana musical performances, each contributing to the rich tapestry of sounds defining this genre. The interplay of these instruments, guided by the intricate melodic structures of maqams, creates a symphonic experience that transports listeners to realms of spiritual contemplation and emotional resonance.

Terminology in Sufiana Music

Terminology in Sufiana music reflects the rich linguistic and cultural heritage of Kashmir. Terms like Ahang, Maqam, Shoba, Parda, specific Tala systems, Sufiana Kalam, and Sufi poetry form the lexicon of Sufiana music, embodying the nuanced expressions and emotive depth of this musical tradition. Each term carries specific meaning and significance, adding layers of complexity and beauty to Sufiana compositions.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Sufiana music in Kashmir stands as a testament to the enduring legacy of cultural richness, artistic mastery, and spiritual depth. The Gharana system, artists' contributions, instruments used, and terminology employed all converge to create a vibrant and captivating musical landscape that resonates with audiences worldwide. As the echoes of Sufiana Mousiqui continue to harmonize through the valleys of Kashmir, they embody the timeless allure and enduring mystique of this captivating musical tradition.

(The author is a researcher based in Srinagar, Kashmir.)

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Rahim Saeb Sopoere

Our traditional mystic poet

Khursheed Dar

Abdul Rahim Shah popularly known as Rahim Saeb Sopoere was a traditional mystic poet of Kashmir who epitomised the cultural values of Kashmir.

His contribution to Kashmiri Sufi poetry cannot be ignored. Like other Sufi poets of Kashmir, Rahim Saeb Sopoere too was the embodiment of Kashmiri language and literature who too preferred to use his own Kashmiri dialect for conveying his message and thoughts, and connected people with their language and culture.

No authentic biography of this mystic poet of our bygone era is found. Whatever information we have today is what we come across in his verses and some oral traditions which have passed through from generation to generation.

What we get from little biography of Rahim Seab Sopoere from written sources is that he was wholly tended towards divine contemplation from early years of his life. He acquired the teachings of mysticism from a towering mystic of the time, Hazrat Qadir Shah Saeb, whose resting place is at a village called Renun in Langate Tehsil of district Kupwara.

Mohammad Amin Shakeeb's monograph about Rahim Saeb Sopoere is unparalleled in this connection. This picturesque monograph about Rahim Saeb Sopoere prompted me to write this column.

From the available oral and written sources the author of this column came to know that Rahim Saeb Sopoere was born in 1775 at Tilwani Mahala of Sopore town. He received his early education from his father, Abdul Rahman Shah. Rahim Saeb was a gifted child and always accompanied his father.

Rahim Saeb later on learnt the poetry of Jami, Sheikh Saadi,

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and Molana Rumi from Molvi Mohammad Anwar. After the demise of his father he was looked after by his uncle namely Abdul Samad Shah. His uncle sent to him to learn the craft of weaving at Batpora Sopore.

There he would sit in the company of a faqir namely Juma. While plying the loom, he felt like weaving mystical patterns, marking the beginning of musical journey. Soon he became a good musician and formed his own singing party. He was a master player of Rabab and Santoor.

One day Rahim Saeb was singing at the shrine of Hazrat Syed Jalal-ud Din Bukhari (RA). He interacted with a female mystic namely Khanum. Khanam's poetic remarks made Rahim Saeb search for a spiritual mentor.

Mohammad Amin Shakeeb writes that Rahim Saeb was married to a virtuous woman namely Khatej Ded and had two sons and a daughter from her. He had also adopted an orphan girl namely Saja Ded whom he married with Mohammad Rajab Shah of Tapar Baramulla.

Unfortunately the husband of Saja died a few years after marriage. As per word of mouth, it is said that this mystic spent a good time at Hanjishat Langate. There he used to meditate in a cave. The ruins of a fresh water spring, used by this mystic for ablutions are still seen there. A number of orchards are named after him at Hanjishat Langate.

Rahim Saeb had close intimacy to Qalandar Jamal Saeb of Pohrupeth Langate. Here he met his spiritual mentor, Qalandar Qadir Saeb.

Becoming the pedestrian on a Sufi path he got connected with the Qadri Sufi order (Silsila of Hazrat Sheikh Syed Abdul Qadir Jeelani RA). He was significantly influenced by Lal Ded and Nund Reshi.

It is said that Rahim Saeb started his poetic journey from the blessed darbar of his mentor, Qadir Shah Saeb and quickly became known for his mystic poetry.

He had close ties with Mahmood Gami. Rahim Saeb visited all over Kashmir. Rahim Saeb introduced a traditional style in

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Kashmiri Sufi poetry. He used Sanskrit, Persian and Arabic words in his poems.

From his poems it is noticeable that he had deep knowledge about mysticism. He described his thoughts beautifully in a unique manner. We perceive a never ending mystical aspect in his verses which is compatible with all forms of spirituality across cultures and religions.

His poetry has impressed and influenced both the communities, Hindus and Muslims; he expressed incredible aptitude to suggest mystical ideas which leads to the Divine path:

Tani Gom Rabaab
Ragan gayam taare
Zeer o Bum th'hovth'hum Cheero lo

My body is a Rabab, veins the strings
From these you cleave out notes high and low

Rahim Saeb's poetry has transcended both time and language, speaking to readers across ages, as fresh and meaningful today as it was when written. His poetry reveals that he was well-versed with the teachings and life of Prophet Muhammad (SAW).

He has written poems in the honour and spiritual journey of Prophet Muhammad (SAW), which elucidates his wakefulness about mystic way.

He has explained stages of that mystic path which Sufi Masters used to go through. His poetry is rich in diction and meter.

Rahim Saeb Sopoere was an outstanding Sufi poet who had absolute grip on language. He specified his thoughts, knowledge and experience in his poetry. Rahim Saeb wrote his poetry in Persian as well.

This mystic poet wrote thousands of Sufi poems in which he reflected on universal human values like brotherhood, harmony, human vulnerability, mystic pursuits and the love of God.

His poetry often deals with the true abstract qualities such as beauty and truth, and then relates how these qualities (as aspects of God) relate to the world around him.

Beyond that, a common theme is the praise of prophets, Sufi saints, harmony and brotherhood and unity. Many of his po-

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Beyond that, a common theme is the praise of prophets, Sufi saints, harmony and brotherhood and unity. Many of his po-

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ems are on the theme of a mystic's quest for the primal cause of the universe.

Rahim Seab used Kashmiri idiom of his times, and also words from Persian, Arabic and Sanskrit.

Almost all of his poetry is in Kashmiri language; most of his poems are sung by Sufi Singers in Sufi Mehfils. He introduced a new style in Kashmiri Sufi poetry and took Kashmiri Sufi poetry to great heights.

His poetry is so impressive, and only those who are tethered to Sufism can know its strength. For him love of God meant love of humanity:

Ander loolnaran bu zaejnas;
Waay!reh nu tuth, duh na tuth.
Yes aas shab o rooz manz naaras ;
Beem daznuk kiyah chhu tas.
Beem daznuk chhu kaam aashiqas,
Waay! reh nu tuth duh na tuth.
The fire of love within me has burnt me down;
Alas! this fire has nether flame nor smoke.
One who is in fire day and night;
Is not afraid of being burnt.
Only the half-baked lover is afraid of being burnt.
Mercy! this fire has neither flame nor smoke.

His poetry has a deep spiritual meaning. The similes and the metaphors put to use by Rahim Saeb bring forth the intense appeal of Kashmiri Sufi poetry on the surface for further analysis.

The last days of this mystic poet were not good. The demise of his son and wife dejected him much.

Rahim Saeb Sopore left for heavenly abode in 1850 and was buried at Batpora Sopore. His shrine is thronged by the devotees round the year.

Rahim Saeb Sopore was a poet of great competence, had firm grip on languages and was fond of debates and discussions. He was extremely respected and loved by the people. He has left a rich literary and cultural legacy behind.

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BOO'EN:
Nature's fiery masterpiece

Manzoor Akash

Hazrat Ameer-e-Kabir, Mir Sayyid Ali Hamadani (RA) is credited with introducing many admirable things for which Kashmir is so famous. He got over here with his Sadat (descendents) who visited various parts of the Valley, spreading Islam and influencing the culture of the region. One among such incredible gifts is the native tree of Kashmir, Chinar, locally referred to as Boo'en (also spelled Bouen), a broken down word of Sanskrit 'Bhawani', the goddess who is worshipped (by many and revered by all) in Kashmir. Being an integral part of our cultural heritage and identity, Boo'en is believed to have been first planted here by Syed Qasim Shah Hamadani (RA), a companion of Shah-e-Hamadan Sahib (RA).

Boo'en in autumn (Harud) attracts tourists to flock Kashmir valley painted in red. Mughal gardens get totally transformed into a vibrant haven of crimson red, offering comfort to the nature lovers. Draped in red hues, Boo'en looks as if it is immersed in various layers of colors. It remains at its most attractive stage with crimson red colored foliage on its branches, also scattered on the ground producing rustling sound blessing the whole ambiance with a majestic look. During this season, it looks mesmerizing and has a great appeal for every one of us because it turns reddish as if it is on fire.

While in hot summer, people take rest under its cool shade of the large deciduous tree; in autumn, they love to mingle themselves in its reddish leafage that creates a magical golden aura. A symbol of splendor and resilience, Boo'en offers a charming look especially in Naseem Bagh and on Dal Lake and Jhelum banks in Srinagar.

In Srinagar city Boo'en wears a dazzling look. Tourists gather under it with locals and click snaps to be cherished as a

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memory. They love to trample on the crunchy dried leaves to hear the muffled crackling sound. Sometimes, they join locals to enjoy bonfires, not for warmth but to take back Kashmir's memories.

However, the beauty of Boo'en in Srinagar is beyond the Mughal gardens. It also looks pretty on the captivating Dal and Jhelum banks. Last time, what left me utterly awestruck while driving from Nageen lake side towards LD hospital via Zero Bridge was the enchanting autumn grandeur of iconic Chinars reflecting our heritage. The visual odyssey had so fascinating an impact on me that I had no option but to stop awhile outside SPS museum.

Literally, no sooner I strolled out than I was totally taken aback into the autumn charm of the fiery surroundings. Because just across the river Jhelum was the mighty Boo'en, donning the golden crown behind the eye-catchy Masjid-e-Bilal. The crispy crimson leaves fallen on the tiled paths along the road appeared to me like a red carpet spread under the resplendent canopy of my culture, resonating the tales of modern trials.

Known for its antiquity, magnificence, longevity and royal touch, Boo'en in rural Kashmir is equally surreal and beautiful. Here, people especially women sweep the scattered leaves of it for fuel or charcoal for their Kangris. However, besides this purpose, people in villages also use (though least followed) the bark of Boo'en to attain anti-rheumatic and antiscorbutic values, believing that bark boiled in vinegar is a great remedy for dysentery and diarrhea.

But sadly Boo'en in Kashmir seems destined for a terrible fate. Its number is declining. The percentage of it looped is more than planted. Experts have voiced their concern that in two decades Kashmir would be without such glorious trees if strict measures are not taken.

The blazing foliage of Boo'en is pleasant throughout Kashmir. It is totally hard to take one's eyes away and go without admiring the fiery reddish tinge that stays probably for a week's

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time or so, and soon after, the tree becomes barren. Nevertheless, the true essence lies with the on-lookers who are laden with their own load of feelings about its glory. Protecting Boo'en is preserving Kashmir's identity.

(The author is an educationist and writer.)

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The Origin

Habib Kamran
Translated from the Kashmiri by
Prof Neerja Mattoo

It is an old story familiar to everyone.
Once upon a time a king of Kashmir was seated in his court, surrounded by courtiers, when the city Kotwal entered with his men. They had brought in two women and a child, whom they produced before the king. The kotwal bowed deeply and began, "Great and noble king these two women were found fighting with each other over this child outside the Royal palace. This child would have been torn in two for sure, pulled as he was by them both in opposite directions. These witches themselves would have been stoned to death by the agitated mob, had I not arrested them at once and brought them before your Majesty. Each of them claims to be this child's mother; they are vehement in their protestations and refuse to yield their right over him. Your Royal Majesty alone can settle the issue and restore the child to his real mother."

The king observed the women and the child and then looked at his minister. The minister asked one woman to state her case. Beating the chest, she cried, "Great and omnipotent king, this Kotwal is lying. He did not arrest us, we were coming ourselves to plead the case before you, when he ran after us. I am Zoonmal and this is my son, my heart, the light of my eyes. I have given birth to him and he belongs to me."

The king glanced at the other woman, and she too beat her chest and cried, "Oh just king I am Heemal. Zoonmal is lying. This child is the strength of my limbs, a part of my body, my flesh and blood, sprung from my womb. He only belongs

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to me and no one else."

The king asked Zoonmal whether she could produce a witness in her favour, and she replied, "My Majestic Lord I am a shepherdess, who lives in a far meadow, where there are no neighbours, friends or relatives living around. How can I produce a witness."

The king turned to Heemal and asked her whether she had a witness to support her claim. She said," My Royal Lord, I too am a shepherdess, living on the same high pasture as Zoonmal. The only neighbour or acquaintance that I have there is this very Zoonmal. I can produce no other witness to my right over this child."

The king gave orders that the child's father be brought before him. Zoonmal again beat her breast, threw herself on the floor and wailed, "Oh if only the departed one were alive, wouldn't he then have settled the issue himself? My husband and this child's father was one, Sona, a shepherd. We lived in the high pastures, tending our stock. One day a terrible storm rose, thunder and lightning set off terror among our flock and it got scattered. Sona went looking for the sheep in that dreadful weather, trying to gather them back together. But he never returned, he had fallen prey to a tiger.

Now the king turned to Heemal and asked her whether she could call the child's father to come forward.

Heemal began to weep and tear her hair in grief, "Had he been alive, would he have stood by and watched silently while Zoonmal tried to commit this deed? Sona, the shepherd was not just Zoonmal's husband, he was mine too. I was his second—no, Zoonmal was his second wife. Both of us are his widows, who went looking for the flock and never returned."

The king gave orders for the child to be tied tightly to a log of wood and the log should then be sawn into two, so that the child would get evenly divided into two pieces from top to toe. One piece each should then be handed over to the women claiming him.

The soldiers tied the child to the log. The executioners came

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and began to saw the log. Seeing this, Zoonmal screamed and clawing her face in grief, burst out, "Oh Great King, don't do this. Don't let this happen to my beloved son before my very eyes. Alas! Has an innocent child ever been subjected to such torture? My Exalted Lord, I surrender before Heemal's claim. Let her keep him so that he can live and blossom like a rose. My eyes will feel soothed even with an occasional glimpse of him."

The King said, "Tell me, who is the child's mother?" Zoonmal replied, "May I die for him. What would I not do for his sake? The child is mine, but I would wish my eyes to go blind rather than seeing him being cut into two pieces. That is why I let him be handed over to Heemal."

On the other hand, Heemal too had raised an outcry, beating her breast and weeping, "O just king, don't let the beloved, my heart die so cruelly before my eyes. What shall I do? Boiling oil is burning my innards, how can I bear to see his milky white, tender body under the teeth of the saw? I am ready to withdraw my plea, quite willing for Zoonmal to have custody of the child. Let her raise him, I will be content, merely by watching him, even if only from a distance." The king asked her too, "But who has actually borne him?" Heemal said, "My Good king, I have given birth to him, but I am leaving him to Zoonmal. Let him live and prosper with her."

The king declared, "First Zoonmal was saying that the child was hers and so was Heemal. Each persistently claimed to be the real mother, but now, in order to save the child's life, each is ready to forego her claim—Zoonmal wants him to go to Heemal and Heemal, for her part, wants him to go to Zoonmal. But it is still not clear whose child he really is, so how can we give him to one or the other woman? The only thing to do, in order to be fair and just, is to divide the child's body into two and hand one piece to each of them."

Saying this, the king beckoned the executioners and once again they began to work the saw on the log. It was about to touch the child's head when Zoonmal screamed, "Oh compassionate king. I am a wicked woman, a wicked liar. Craving for

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motherhood has blinded me, driven me to lodge a claim over this child, who is not mine. He belongs to Heemal. Please, I beg you to untie him from the log and hand him over to her. It is she who has given birth to him."

The king gave his orders. Heemal was to get custody of the child and Zoonmal was to be tied to the tail of a fleetfooted horse. It was to be a slow and cruel process, death would only come to her after her limbs would be mauled. Only such a punishment was fit for one who dared to snatch another's child.

But when the judgement fell on Heemal's ears, she began to wring her hands piteously and wailed, "Oh my king, how can Zoonmal be punished so? It is I who is the liar. This child is Zoonmal's, I could not bear the thought that she could have a child in her lap and mine should be barren. That is why I put forth this claim. Please give the child to her and let me be tied to that horse's tail."

The king said, "It is an extremely complicated case now. And it will not be possible for us to settle the matter in one day. Let the child and these two women be produced in court tomorrow, so that justice can be done. Meanwhile, the child must be kept in the custody of my Prime Minister and the women lodged in jail."

As the orders were being executed and the two women led to the prison, the King called the Grand Vizier to come, and whispered something in his ear. The Prime Minister bowed his head in submission to the king's desire, his will to be carried out.

Zoonmal and Heemal were in jail, mourning their fate, weeping loudly, when at about midnight there was a knock at the door. It opened to reveal the Prime Minister. He was alone, carrying two pots in two hands. He entered the cell, closing the door behind him, and sat down, waiting.

"O wise sir, what have you done with him, that bright sun of ours?", Zoonmal asked.

"O wise sir, where have you kept that rose of our garden?" asked Heemal.

"Your child is sleeping on a royal bed at this time, but this

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is going to be the last night of his life. Tomorrow in the Royal Court his body will be slashed into two pieces, and each one of you will receive one piece."

This brought forth a stream of tears from the eyes of both women and they begged, "Is there no way, O sagacious sir, to spare the precious, dear life of our beloved?"

The Minister said "What can I do in this matter? The two of you change your story from moment to moment, how can the king believe in anything either of you say now? That is why it is difficult for him to arrive at the truth and know who the real mother of the child is. Our judicious king will never let the rights of one to be appropriated by another."

The women's tears were a cascade now and they spoke in one voice, "O learned, accomplished sir, we are just two stupid ignorant women, what can we understand of the king's justice? It is for you to show us a way to save that tender lamb from the teeth of the saw."

He turned to Zoonmal and asked, "Will you accept separation from the child in order to ensure his safety?"

"Separation from the child is like losing my sight, but if this be the only way to save him, I shall turn my heart into a stone and bear it."

He turned to Heemal now, "Will you agree to give up the child and never see him again in order to save his life?"

"Though parting from the child would mean life ebbing from my limbs, but I am ready to bear anything, if it should mean his safety."

"Then listen, both of you. Hand over your child to me and leave this very moment, under the cover of darkness to your high pastures."

Again Zoonmal beat her chest and cried, "Who will care for my innocent baby? Who will make him asleep, rock his crib? Whose hands will nurture him?"

Clawing her face in grief, Heemal wept, "Who will bathe him, feed him or sing lullabies to him? Whose breast will give him the warmth of love?"

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"It is not for you to worry about that. This child is very fortunate, his stars are extremely lucky and auspicious. He will be brought up like a prince, with maids, nurses and nannies to look after his every need. He will be dressed in precious brocades and silks. If you only knew the heights to which he would reach, you would at once give him up, willingly, and leave him with me. I have nothing more to say to either of you. In fact, I am not allowed to tell you everything."

"Is it really the truth you are telling us, Sir? Will you swear on it, in the name of God?"

"I swear in the name of God, who had created me and who is the master of the whole universe."

"In that case, we are ready to leave him in your care and go back to the high pasture where our home is."

"There is something more, you must never tell anyone about this deal. If even a word leaks out, all of us, the child, the two of you and I will be cut to pieces by that same saw and no one can save us then. So you must promise that the secret will always be safe with you."

"I shall pull out my tongue, if it ever dares to mention it," said Zoonmal.

"I shall pour molten lead down my throat if ever it dares to breathe of it," said Heemal.

The minister then brought forward the two silver pots and said, "Here is a pot, full of gold coins for you, Zoonmal, and here is another for you, Heemal. Take them with you. It is enough for both of you to live comfortably for the rest of your lives, so you will never have to depend on anyone's charity in future."

The Minister turned to leave and Zoonmal hit her brow with her hand and moaned, "O God, whom shall I feed the milk from my goats and sheep?"

Heemal beat her chest and cried, "Whose neck will I deck with garlands of roses and honeysuckle I bring home every evening?"

The Minister walked out, Zoonmal followed and grabbed his sleeve, saying "I have agreed to all your suggestions, but please,

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for God's sake, you must listen to one thing that I suggest."

"Well, what is it?"

"First you must promise that you will do what I ask for."

"I promise. Now hurry up and tell me what it is."

Zoonmal placed the pot of gold coins in his hands and said, "when my darling little bud attains youth, you must give him this and tell him that it was left for him by his mother, Zoonmal.

The Minister was leaving with pot when Zoonmal called out, "if you ever break the promise given to me, you will have to face me on the Day of Judgement."

As the Minister walked some distance, Heemal followed too, grabbed his sleeve and said, "I have agreed to all your terms, now I beg you to listen to one request from me."

The Minister was angry now, "I am very late. Hurry up and say what it is.

Heemal brought her pot of gold coins forward and said, "When that priceless pearl of mine grows up, please give this to him and tell him that it had been left for him by his mother, Heemal."

The Minister said, "No, no, that is not possible. How can I do it? I am bound by a promise already made, how can I do what you ask for?"

"If you don't agree, I shall appeal to the king himself, first thing in the morning."

The Minister lost his colour, very frightened now, he said, "Clearly, the Angel of Death is hovering above your head, and you want to take me along too. Get going, you two. Not even your shadow must be seen in this town after day-break. For God's sake, go. Oh, how do I make you understand the consequences of your lingering here?"

"Then you too must do what I ask, for God's sake? Said Heemal

"All right, I agree. After all, who knows what the future holds?", saying this, the Minister took back the other pot of gold.

The Minister left, with Heemal's parting words ringing in his

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ears, "Listen, if you break faith, I will grab you by the throat on the Day of Judgement."

The next day came the public announcement that the Queen has delivered a baby boy, and the people were asked to celebrate the happy event for a whole month. The king has been childless so far, so his subjects' joy knew no bounds at an heir to the kingdom being born. The music of shehnai and drums filled the air everywhere. While the married women put on festive clothes, maidens sang and danced in joy. Professional dancing girls in red garments whirled away, abandoning themselves to the general spirit of rejoicing. Lamps were lit to illuminate every corner of the kingdom. There was a shower of flowers everywhere. Outside the palace, the scene was that of a magnificent fair, with loud music and boisterous crowds, who came to offer their greetings to the king, being rewarded with fistfuls of diamonds and pearls and handfuls of gold mohurs, in return.

The prince was given the name of Jahandad Shah. The queen would not tire of holding him in her lap, fondling him all the same. There were maids to fan him. Well-known pirs and faqirs were asked to weave charms to tie on his arm, to ward off the evil eye. Wet nurses suckled him and he was weaved on honey and milk.

With the passage of time, the prince grew up, learning well the ways and duties of royalty. Meanwhile the king's age advanced and soon the day came when he could no longer take charge of the tough responsibility of running the kingdom. Suddenly, he became aware of his morality and began to think of preparing to face his Maker. He called for his trusted Minister, and said to him, "My wise minister, how can I ever repay you for all that you have done for me all these years? There is nothing with me which is of value to equal your dedicated service to me. There were so many problems I faced during my rule, so many ups and downs. But, your advice set me sail through all of them, without mishap. It was such a long reign and old age has now brought me low—I can no longer cope.

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I may not have long to live, so I must prepare for the other world. I have decided to hand over the reins to my son, prince Jahandad. What is your opinion?"

The Minister bowed his head and said, "My High principled Lord, who am I to have displayed exceptional dedication, or wisdom? Let your blessed presence stay with us always and let your power never be diminished. Our Jahandad Shah is so wise, so brave and courageous a prince that I find myself a pigmy in his presence. God keep him, he is very well equipped to handle all the responsibilities that a ruler of this kingdom must shoulder."

The king then handed over his sceptre and crown to prince Jahandad and left for the forest where he took up residence in a cave, giving up to meditating.

Jahandad's reign saw the kingdom prosper even more than before. His glory struck terror in all his enemies. No one dared to raise a malicious eye towards any of his territories. His people were at peace, secure from all quarters, he was a just and generous ruler and they sent up earnest prayers of God to keep him well.

As the new ruler grew his strength to strength, the old minister also grew older and feebler with the passage of time. His back was no longer straight, his eyesight became dim, now he was even hard of hearing. One day, he presented himself before the king and said, "My most dear lord, you must be thinking of me as one consumed by greed, as someone whose one foot is in the grave, continues to immerse himself in worldly affairs, having forgotten his duties to God. But to tell you the truth, it was my most fervent wish to renounce the world and go with your venerated father the king, to meditate and purify my spirit. It is a long time since he kicked away his royal privilege and power, but I am still chained to my office. The reason is not greed or ambition, but there is a burden which I cannot relieve myself of, while it is becoming increasingly difficult for me to carry it any more. The king alone with his love and grace, can save me from this predicament."

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Jahandad said, "My wise and faithful Minister, all that you have done in serving the kingdom, both during my father's time and mine, is greatly valued by us. We can also understand that due to advancing age you might not be finding it easy to carry the burden of office any more. Though your wisdom has been our guiding light, it does not mean that for our own convenience and comfort, we should continue to exploit you and force you to carry on, even when advancing age makes the task difficult for you. If you should feel like giving up your job, we cannot stop you, but rest assured you will continue to enjoy the same status and prestige in the kingdom that you do now. You will continue to draw the same salary and perks as long as you are alive, so there is no need for you to worry about anything.

"Oh highly principled Monarch, thanks to your munificence and that of your father, I lack nothing. The cause of my worry is something which I can only reveal to your Majesty in private."

The Minister was given permission to appear before the king in the privacy of his chamber, with no one else present. He came and placed the two pots of gold coins before him.

"Gracious, Beloved king, when you were only a babe, two women came to me and handed over these two pots of gold coins to me with the request that when you grew up, I should offer them to you on their behalf. I have been keeping them in trust all these years, and now let me hand over what belongs to you. This was the weight I carried on my mind, which had stolen my peace of mind. I had given them a promise that I would do so. They had warned me that if I broke faith, I would have to answer for it on the Day of Judgement."

Jahandad shah was astounded. "Who were those women? What was their purpose in doing so? Didn't they know that kings do not require such gifts? And if they wanted to make an offering, why didn't they make it to the king my father at that time?"

The Minister was lost for words, but recovering, he said, "My own opinion is that they were not mentally sound, in fact

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they were two mad women."

Jahandad Shah was very bright. It did not take him long to guess that the minister was hiding something, unwilling to tell the truth, preferring to tell a diplomatic lie. He asked, "How should two mad women acquire pots of gold? And would a wise man like you leave it at that, making no effort to investigate the matter? Why should they hand over pots of gold to ask you to give them to me when I reached adulthood, even go to the extent of holding out the threat of retribution, if you didn't do their bidding? What made them so fond of me? And more than anything else, why did you hesitate so long before coming to me with this gift? Listen, if you are so concerned about the afterworld, you must think about this world first—if you don't tell me the truth, the whole truth, plain and simple, you are doomed."

The Minister knew that it wouldn't be easy to fool an intelligent perceptive man like Jahandad, by weaving a web of words before him. He had no choice but to relate the whole sequence of events exactly as it had unfolded itself.

The revelation of the truth was a bolt from the blue for Jahandad. He was speechless with horror. But he was a king after all, able to exercise self-control and hide the turmoil in his heart. After a long silence, he spoke, "My wise and resourceful Minister, did you finally find out who, between the two, Zoonmal and Heemal, was my real mother?"

"Dear prince, my great king, is not the august queen of this land, who nurtured and doted on you, all these years, since you grew up from infancy to youth, your mother? She, who held you to her heart, nourished you with her love and had you crowned as a king, she alone is your mother."

There was a fumble in Minister's voice.

"The Queen is of course, what women other than the Queen of this land could be my mother? Her status cannot be usurped by anyone—I am her son, surely. But after the heart-rending truth you told me today, I must know who actually gave birth to me. I have to discover my true identity, find out

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where my origin is. Till I do so, my crown, my life, my very existence is useless, utterly meaningless."

"My Lord, you were destined to be the king—nature itself arranged it so. Please listen to me, forget the past."

"One may succeed in deceiving others by hiding one's real identity, but not oneself. Haven't you seen clowns putting up a comic performance outside the palace every year, with one playing the role of a king, another a minister, a third someone else? But they know who they really are. It seems that I must also think of myself as one of those jokers now. I have to know who my real mother is, whose womb I was carried in and delivered from, otherwise there is no purpose of my life."

The Minister gave the matter some thought and said, "There is just one way, and that is to call both Zoonmal and Heemal here. The king himself can then ascertain the truth from them."

"Do you think they are still alive?"

"I know they are alive. I also know where their home in the high pastures is. I did not leave them neglected all these years, so fetching them should not be difficult. I shall arrange it myself."

Messengers were dispatched and within a few days both the women, Zoonmal and Heemal were brought to the palace. Jahandad Shah had been told by the minister that the two women would constantly change their statements in each other's presence, so he gave orders that they should be lodged in separate houses, neither of them must know where the other was, nor should any means of communication between the two be provided to them. The king also gave orders that they must receive royal treatment, fit for queens.

After a few days, Jahandad Shah went to see Zoonmal and said, "Zoonmal, try to recall that day when you were found quarrelling with Heemal over a child at this place. You claimed the child as your own and so did Heemal and the matter was brought before the king, to know who the real mother was, to whom the child was to be given. Finally you left the child with

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king's Minister. Do you remember?"

"Great king, I am old, my memory feeble, how should I remember anything now? I have no idea of the child you mention. I have never had a quarrel with anyone over any matter nor have I ever come here before."

"The child you left with the minister that day was put in her own lap by the queen. Take a good look at me—I am that child."

Zoonmal looked at him and said, "My darling prince, my dearest son, may your days increase a millionfold. Let my days be added to yours and make you eternal. May the waters of paradise make you blossom forever. Who but you deserved to wear this crown?"

"I only want to know one thing from you—who was it that gave birth to me? Was it Heemal or you?"

"My beloved son, ask me nothing. Why do you want me to pull out my own tongue by the root?"

"But why should you do that?"

"Because I have given a promise—I must pull out my tongue before it can dare to speak of it."

"But who could have made you this promise?"

"No, my prince, I seal my lips. Not a word more shall I utter."

"Disheartened and frustrated, Jahandad left. Then he went to Heemal's chamber, and asked, "Do you remember that child, Heemal, whom you and Zoonmal left with the king's Minister? The child over whom you two were quarrelling, both claiming to be his mother? And the king himself had been unable to decide who the child should be given between the two of you?"

Heemal answered, "Majestic king, can death and sorrows leave memory intact? What child are you talking about? I have no idea at all."

"The child I am talking about is a grown up man now, and he is standing before you. I am that child."

"My beloved prince, God grants you life and success forever. My darling son let me die for you. May you always be safe from the evil eye, eternally in bloom. Who but you deserved to wear these royal robes?"

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"Please do me a favour, Heemal and tell him who actually gave birth to me. Was it Zoonmal or you?"

"Better to pour molten lead down my throat, rather than ask me to answer you, my adored prince."

"But what is the reason? Why do you want your throat sealed?"

"Because I have promised, before a word of what you are asking about, is breathed out by it. I shall pour molten lead down my throat."

"Alas! Does it mean that my desire to know will remain unfulfilled forever."

Heemal said, "You, a royal prince, and the two of us, just ordinary shepherdesses from a far off pasture. What will you gain from us?

"Because I want to know, I must know who gave birth to me. I must know what I actually am."

"Light of my eyes, I would have told to you, but my lips have been sealed, so much the worse for me", said Heemal.

Jahandad hit his brow in frustration and appealed to Heemal again, "At least tell me one thing--- who made the two of you give this promise?"

"It was your minister, noble king, the same minister who sent for us and under whose behest we had to come here."

The next day the minister was summoned to the king's private chamber.

"The two simple souls from the high pasture have sealed their lips. It seems that someone has extracted a promise from them both, that the truth shall never be breathed by them," Jahahdad said.

"My Great King, I am the guilty one—it is I who made them promise."

Jahandad gave the minister a hard look and a tremor went through the Minister's body.

"I had to do it, had the truth become public, it would have been a calamity. God alone knows how many would have perished."

"And you would have been one among them."

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"Most certainly the king, your father, would certainly have had me cut into pieces with that saw."

"And that made you cover up the truth forever. But you tell me, what happens to one who is put under the teeth of a saw?"

The Minister trembled in agitation and said, "Our king is wise and knowledgeable, why does he need me to tell him?"

"The one who is brought under a saw will die even before the first tooth pierces through him. But, what about the one whose body has been divided into two by a saw and yet continues to live?"

The Minister's face was drained of all colour, it seemed to have turned blue. Trembling in fear, he shuttered, "But now—but, is such a thing possible?"

"It is, and you are standing before such a one now. I am the one to whom it has happened."

"Beloved Prince, that is why I had begged you to forget the past."

"If it had been possible to forget the past, the two pots of gold would not have appeared before me—I mean the pots that those two shepherdesses had given you for me, and my soul would not have been in such torment.

The next day, on Jalahdad Shah's orders, the Minister was brought under the teeth of saw, his body sliced in two.

And then once again, Jahandad stood before Zoonmal and asked, "I ask you once again to give me the answer to the question I had put you the other day. You must answer me now."

Again Zoonmal gave him the same reply—let him pull out her tongue by the root before she could utter a single word and break faith.

"Don't be afraid. The person to whom you had made the promise is nowhere now. He is gone."

Startled, Zoonmal asked, "What happened to him? Where did he go?"

"Lord have mercy, dead, is he? But that Great King, before whose throne of Justice Heemal and I were brought that day, is he all right?"

"My noble father, the king is all right, God keep us under his

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benevolent presence forever. It is his grace that enables us to survive on this land."

Zoonmal stood silent, with her head bowed.

"Answer me I say was it Heemal or you that gave birth to me?"

"Noble King would a poor, lowly shepherdess, living on God forsaken heights, ever have had the good fortune to produce a son like you? So handsome, so majestic in bearing, brought up in a palace with royalty as company, wearing the crown of a king? How could I ever be your mother, my beloved king?"

"So you admit that you are not my mother?"

"Oh my heart and Soul, is it possible for anyone in the world to deny it, if she should be called mother by you?"

"This is no answer to my query. Give me a plain and straight reply."

"I know nothing. Please go and ask Heemal, she might be able to tell you something to make you happy and set your heart at rest."

Jahandad went into deep thought for a while and then said, "I have already questioned her."

Zoonmal was in a panic. Pale with fear, she asked, "What did she say?"

"She said that she was my real mother, the one who had actually given birth to me, and that Zoonmal had made a false claim on me."

"Yes, Oh yes Heemal told you the truth, my dear. The jewel that we had handed over to the Minister that day was certainly born of the same Heemal, just as he emerged from the womb. I put him in my lap and held him to my breast. I was the one who bathed him and swaddled him in a piece of toosh spun with my hand, held him under the folds of my pheran to keep out the cold, let him sleep on my breasts to give him a soft bed, fed him on the sweet milk of the goats and ewes lest he should feel hungry. That is why I had said that he was my son."

"Yes, that is the truth, my heart and soul. May my life be sacrificed for you"

Soon after, Jahandad stood before Heemal and asked, "An-

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swer the question that I had asked you earlier, Heemal."

"But I told you that I was helpless and could not give you any answer."

"Don't be afraid, the man, that minister who had forced you to keep your mouth shut is no longer in the world. He is dead."

"What, the poor fellow is dead? What about the great king, who had gone into that case involving me and Zoonmal, is he well and living?"

"Long live my father, the king. It is he who is the light of this country."

Heemal stood silent, with bowed head.

Jahandad demanded, "Now tell me who my real mother is, was it Zoonmal or you who gave birth to me?"

"Would a wretched shepherdess deserve to be the mother of a prince, radiant like the sun as you are? How could I be your mother?"

"Then who was I born of?"

"What can I say? Why don't you ask Zoonmal? She is the one who knows and can tell you the truth."

Jahandad thought for some time and then spoke, "I have already asked her."

Suddenly Heemal seemed to have been washed over by a saffron dye, pale from head to toe, panic-stricken, she burst out, "What did she say, my beloved prince?"

"She said that she was my real mother, not you."

"Of course she told you the truth. The bright gem that we handed over to the minster that day was born from Zoonmal's womb. The moment it happened, I took him by my arms and he reigned over my heart. It was I who lulled him to sleep, rocked his cradle day and night, made garments of poppies and jasmine to deck his neck, and fed him on lumps of sugar candy. It was this that made me say he was my son."

Jahandad's eye began to glow like burning coals and he said, "You are two lying, deceitful women."

"What, am I not telling you the truth, my son?"

"You lie, Zoonmal never told me any of this. I just made it

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up to test how truthful you are."

"Star of my life if it is not true that Zoonmal is your mother and I tell you now that it was I who gave birth to you, would you believe me?"

"Truth is always the truth, whether anyone believes it or not will not affect it", there was anger in Jahandad's voice.

"But how will you be convinced of what is the truth?"

"Only when the story you tell is same as the one that Zoonmal tells. But if you persist in saying one thing and Zoonmal another, how will I know what is true and what is not?"

Heemal wept and said, "But you have separated us, we don't know anything about each other when you were a baby and we were brought before the king, even then the two of us had made the mistake of telling different stories. Won't you let me meet Zoonmal just once?"

"What kind of truth would it be that depends on mutual consultations?"

"What would a stupid, ignorant shepherdess know of truth and untruth? To me that alone is the truth which ensures that no thorn ever pricks your tender foot and no harm comes to you."

"If you are really interested in my well being, you must tell me plainly whether I was born of you or Zoonmal."

"My beloved son, sorrows and anxieties have broken me. I don't know whether I am capable of telling the truth that you are searching for. Please ask Zoonmal, she is very wise. What she tells you will be the truth. Afterwards, tell me what she said and I will corroborate it and then at last the two of us will speak with one voice, not two, and your mind will finally be set at rest."

Jahandad was furious, "Now I know that as long as you two witches are alive I will never know the fact. To know the truth it is necessary that I put an end to one of you"

The next day Heemal was tied to the tail of the fleetest horse in the royal stable. The horse was made to gallop away and run till Heemal's body was torn to bits and she was dead.

Once again Jahandad stood before Zoonmal and said, "Tell me the truth today. Who is my real mother, you or Heemal?"

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"But I have already told you, my precious."
"But that was not the truth."
"How do you say that?"
"Heemal had never told me that she was my real mother. I just made it up to test how truthful you were, because you hadn't given me a straight answer. In fact she had said my real mother was you, Zoonmal."

"May I die for you, my son. If what she said gives you pleasure, believe it to be the truth. All right then, I am your mother."

"Why did you lie in the first instance, then?", Jahandad raged.

"I had no idea of what Heemal would say. I was afraid, and so the Heemal, because that day when you were a babe in our arms we had made the blunder of speaking in two voices and as a result the king who sat on the throne of justice that day had ordered that you—may my tongue fall in pieces before I can even say it---should be brought under the teeth of a saw and cut into two."

"Tell me what the truth is—who gave birth to me, was it you or Heemal?"

"If you want to know the truth, my prince, let me see Heemal just once?"

"So that you can repeat what she says? Is that the truth you are talking about? Let me tell you one truth, you will never be able to see Heemal's face again."

"Why, where is she? Is she all right?"
"I had that lying witch put to death."

A cry escaped Heemal, "Heemal is dead. Why should I live then?" she beat her chest, tore her clothes to shreds, wept inconsolably, grieving and mourning for Heemal. Finally exhausted, she spoke through her tears, "After Sona, the shepherd's death, there was no one left but the two of us, she had me and I had her. We were everything to each other—confidante, consoler, healer of heartaches, sister, brother, mother, father and friend, who shared each other's sorrows and pains. Alas, the poor, innocent Heemal has been killed?" She turned to Jahandad and continued, "You wanted to know who your moth-

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er was? It was this very Heemal from whose womb you were born, the same Heemal whom you have put to death. You are a murderer. You had your own mother killed, the one who gave you life. Go away, I cannot bear to look at you, you are a monster

"What Jahandad said in agony, "Was Heemal, whom I put to death, my real mother? If what you say is the truth, then I will give myself the deserved punishment," saying this, he drew out his dagger and was about to plunge it into his chest, when Zoonmal wrenched his hand and said, "You drove one knife into me when you had Heemal killed, do you want to drive another into my heart when you kill yourself before my very eyes?"

Jahandad's hand froze and he said, "My death will drive a knife into your heart? Is that what you are saying? What does that mean?"

"It does not mean anything. Henceforth, you will get no more answers from me." She turned her face away. Jahandad threw himself at her feet, wept and said, "Won't you have pity on me, Zoonmal? For once lift the veil of secrecy and tell me in clear words who gave birth to me, you or Heemal? If you don't tell me now, this minute I would die here, at your very feet."

"Give me till tomorrow, and then I shall tell you the whole truth."

"Even though this night's wait will seem to stretch till eternity for me, be more painful than Doomsday--- but I shall bear it all."

"But there is one condition--- you must not come to me henceforth. I myself shall send word to you. The message you receive from me will be the truth, you must believe?"

"Withdraw all the maids and nurses you have kept in my service, except one whom you trust completely. Leave her with me and she will bring you my message tomorrow morning."

Jahanbad ordered the withdrawal of all servants from Zoonmal's chamber, except one elderly nursemaid. Late at night, he went into his own chamber.

Early the next morning, even before daybreak, there was a knock at the door. It was the first time that someone had dared to wake him up from sleep. He opened the door. It was the

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elderly nursemaid he had left in Zoonmal's chamber. Her hair dishevelled, she was in a state of shock. Beating her breast, she blurted out, "Master! Zoonmal is dead."

Jahanbad's face fell. He felt suffocated and ran to the chamber. He saw the dragger which had fallen there, when Zoonmal wrenched it from his hand the previous day, plunged day, plunged deep in her breast. She had done the deed apparently while the nursemaid was in sleep, and now Zoonmal lay cold in.

After her last rites were performed and she was buried, Jahanbad called the nursemaid in the privacy of the room and asked her, "What was the message Zoonmal gave you for me before her death?"

"How can I bring it to my lips, Master? It will burn holes in my tongue and mouth! I dare not say it!"

"Tell me at once--- everything she told you, word by word. Don't be afraid, even if its import should make the whole world go up in flames!"

"Zoonmal asked me to tell you, my Lord, that you were born of neither Heemal nor Zoonmal, but that you had burst out of Rock!";

The next day a proclamation was issued from the royal palace, by a fireman of the king Jahandad Shah himself. The news spread through the length and breadth of the kingdom that the ruler was not a prince born of the queen, but a shephered's child from some far-flung high pasture, and that he would give up the throne and leave in search of his origin and real identity through announcements, the people were asked to select a new ruler.

Jahandad took off the crown and royal robes, dressed himself in ochre robes and walked out of the palace. He wandered through meadows and plains, hills and mountains, forests and wildernesses, valleys and dales, rivers and waterfalls, lakes and springs, cities and villages, market places and narrow lanes, searching, but could find no information anywhere. He questioned sadhus and sages, ascetics and dervishes, pirs and faqeers, the wisest philosophers, scholars and healers, the

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knowers and the ignorant, the commoners and the gifted ones---- but no one could tell him who he was born of. No one could tell him of his origin.

At last he reached the place where the old king was meditating on God in a cave. He threw himself at his feet and said, "My Master and father, you picked me up from the dust and placed me so high. You made me your son and raised me like a prince, with nothing to lack. Finally, you placed the crown on my head and made me the king. You are my master, my father, my king. But fate played a cruel trick on me and I realized that calling myself King was a mere illusion, that I was actually a shepherd boy, son of a poor shepherd, not a prince."

The king looked at him with affection and said, "My dear son, my prince, seeing you in this state makes knives turn in my heart. I do not regret that you have discovered the truth, glad that you have found out things yourself. Had it not been so, I still think of you as my own flesh and blood, so nothing can ever affect my love for you, in fact you are dearer to me now. You continue to be my son and heir and the lawful king of this land."

"I have left the palace and all its luxuries, given up the crown and pushed away the throne because my mind was in turmoil and I had no peace. I could not discover who I was born of, or where my origin was and what my true identity is. You had so many wise, learned and resourceful ministers in your court, so many scholars and astrologers who could measure the path of the stars, and then you yourself were so sagacious, brightest among the bright. Didn't you ever think about it, or didn't anyone say anything which might give me a clue, an idea, a hint or warning of who I was born of,--Zoonmal or Heemal?"

The King looked at Jahandad's face and two streams of tears began to flow down his cheeks.

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Half a Feat

Suman K Sharma

It was not yet 7 in the evening. Shakun would not be home before an hour or so, thought Sunder.

He was beside himself with joy. At 75, he had achieved what he thought was unattainable. Taking the risk of scalding his thumb and index finger, Sunder picked up the glorious testimony of his feat from the stove-burner and put it adoringly into the napkin-covered casserole. The roti was round as a full moon. He had watched its upper surface rise over the bluish flame for a precious second and then settle down like the contentment which comes with a wish fulfilled. From a container close at hand, he took a glob of the Mother Dairy ghee–of the cow variety - and smeared it on the roti. He busied himself to make the second roti, then the third and the fourth one – all nicely round, puffy and daubed with just the right quantity of ghee. Two for Shakun and two for himself. That was enough. Closing the lid on the carefully swathed rotis, he put out the gas stove, washed the still hot griddle along with the roller and sundry other utensils.

He spent another five minutes cleaning the kitchen. Then he came out to his bedroom and sat lordly on his rocking chair before the TV to watch his favourite news channel, Aaj Tak. But he had no heart in the news about distant lands and unknown people. He had made a news of his own. After many failed attempts and by virtue of his determination, he had at last mastered the skills of using just the right quantity of dough for making a perfect roti, flattening a ball of the dough into a circular shape and taking precautions to prevent it from sticking to the fingers or to the rolling board and the hot griddle. Most important of all, now he knew precisely at what stage the rounded lump should be put on the naked flame to make

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it blown up like a balloon. How many 75year old men in his circle could boast of such an achievement, Sunder asked himself. "Hardly any!" Pat came the response from his excited mind. It was this hard-won success he wanted to celebrate with everyone he knew.

The problem was that he had not one person close enough he could speak to. His bosom friends had passed on, one after the other. With the men of his housing society he barely maintained a nodding acquaintance. In the neighbourhood park, where he went for walks in the morning and evening, he cared to talk to no one. No talk while on a walk – that was his funda. His wide circle of relatives was there, only that he met them on weddings and funerals. His daughter, Aarna, living in Pune, was always busy; as was his son, Arunjay – she with her startup and he with teaching Philosophy at the JNU, where he lived with his wife and children. In any case, something in his head alerted him that his offspring, both in their forties, would laugh in his face if he were to tell them of his enterprise. "Khana 'Swiggy' se mangva liya hota, Papa!" Aarna was likely to say. "You have better things to burn your fingers with, Papa!" Arunjay would pontificate. But yes, he had his Shakun. He would tell her he could make rotis as good as she did.

He awaited her return with the eagerness of a schoolboy getting impatient to show off a good report-card to his mother.

If truth be told, Shakun was indeed the only person Sunder always tried to impress. It was not an easy task, though. She had retired as in-charge of the primary section of the Mother School some five-six years ago; yet her motherly insistence on everything to be right had mounted rather than eased off all these years. She insisted on the right kind and the right quantity of what they consumed. Flour should be of the Sharbati wheat from Sehore, MP, ground before her own eyes. Only Mother Dairy ghee of the cow variety would do and none other. At night, they were to have two rotis each with a dish of dal or subzi, buss! It was this constancy of the right habits that had kept them on their feet till now, she was fond of saying.

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Sunder went with her entirely on that. But she demanded that he too should be always right – in her sight, or out of it. He dreaded her summons: "Suno!" It was an indication that he had gone wrong somewhere.

It had happened this morning as well.

"Suno!" She called out to him from the bathroom. After his ablutions, he was sitting on his rocking chair watching the Aaj Tak's latest updates. It took him a couple of minutes to face Shakun who stood with a stern face and arms akimbo before the wash-basin tap. Water dripped from the tap in a thin stream. Shakun stared at him, while he looked glumly at the running water. Neither of them moved to close the tap.

"I have told you a hundred times…" The impact of her words broke his inertia. He turned off the tap at last and moved to go back to his rocking chair.

"Going on eighty and you still don't have manners. Here I am talking to you and you are off to watch TV! TV, TV, TV. Nothing else but TV! You don't have the time even to see that the bathroom tap is turned off properly!"

Against his wishes, Sunder stood waiting for Shakun to end her tirade. He mumbled something inane about his exact age.

"The apples you bought from the Safal shop are rotting in the basket. Why do you waste money like that?

"I had brought those apples because you were on a fast. I thought you might want them."

"As if you really care! Did you peel one for me to eat? Ever? Leave me aside. Did you eat one yourself? You are not a baby that I should force-feed you. If you go on like this, you will fall sick before long. Don't expect me to nurse you. I am not growing younger and I have a hundred problems to attend. Dhobi delivered the ironed curtains long ago. They are eating dust in the balcony. If my knees were not hurting, I would have hung them myself. Of what use it is to me to have you around?"

"Dhobi brought the curtains only last night. I was thinking of hanging them…"

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"Don't argue with me. Go and watch that stupid TV. That's all you are good for."

Sunder went back to his room. In unspent fury, he switched off the TV and sat morosely in the prevailing stillness. The ticking of the clock got on his nerves. These were the occasions he felt how lonely he was. There was a time, he recollected ruefully, when this small house was filled with the thrill of surging life.

"Will you bring me a packet of frozen peas and some paneer." Shakun's voice, now soothing as a balm, brought him relief. He had not noticed since when she had been standing by his chair. It was a signal of truce from her. Getting up, he took his wallet from where it lay on the side-table. "Shall I bring a few bananas as well?" he asked with a conciliatory smile. "Bring, if you wish. But not a whole dozen! Do see that they are neither raw nor overripe." Sunder was at the door when she called him out, "You have forgotten to take the shopping bag. Shopkeepers don't provide plastic bags for the grocery these days." Sunder took the cloth-bag from the kitchen and set forth for the market.

Walking on the footpath, he wondered if Shakun was indeed the same Shakuntala who, more than half a century ago, had fascinated him with her first Namaste in her parents' living room. Shakuntala and Shakun – one a delicate, shy, receding and pliant girl who did everything as told, and the other, a thick-faced matron out to make him a 'right' kind of man, something which his own mother could never manage to do. There was yet another Shakun for him, a woman who had remained little affected by the passage of time. Neither her feminine gait, nor did her complexion show much of the onslaught of ageing. Her full lips still held the promise of the pink. Her hair, regularly dyed, retained the memories of its youthful lustre. And when she spoke to him on phone her voice carried the sour-sweetness of an orange. Only the defiance of her slightly upturned nose, which in her twenties had lent her the beguiling looks of the Bollywood Mumtaz, gave a subtle hint that she

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was not the one to trifle with.

Time is such a delusion, he mused. When one looks ahead, even the passage of an hour seems too long a span; but when one looks back, decades after decades appear to have passed by in an instant. Memories crowded in his head: his marriage with Shakuntala; their nightly dips into their private pool of pink passion; the births, at first of their daughter Aarna and then of the son, Arunjay; the years of little and big compromises both of them made for the sake of their marital togetherness; the growing up of their children and their carving out of own niches in the wide world – Aarna, married to a successful lawyer, was now an entrepreneur in her own right and Arunjay taught at the JNU....

Sunder approached the fruit vender standing at the corner of the market and bought a bunch of four bananas. While he was retracing his steps back home, his mind got lost all over again in the labyrinth of memories. Their home was small and full of voices – voices of the siblings quarrelling; of his mother complaining of body-ache which refused to go; of Shakun confiding in him the bickering of the teachers of her school; of the loud chattering of Arunjay's college friends; of Shakun upbraiding him for his lack of social graces and his failure to play a good host. Voices came back to him like torn and disconnected fragments from the fabric of his past and present life. Once he heard his own voice too, only to realise that he was talking aloud to himself.

Shakun opened the door to him instantly, as if she were standing behind the door. Unhurriedly, he took out the bananas from the shopping bag and placed them on the dining table. He folded the empty bag with care to put it back in its usual place in the kitchen drawer. Shakun stood watching every move of his. "You have not brought peas and paneer?" She asked, not caring to conceal her irritation.

"I forgot!" Angry at himself, he couldn't say more.

"You don't forget eating. You don't forget your TV. But you forget what I tell you to bring from bazar. Tomorrow, you

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will say you have forgotten who I am. Look at your nails, each one is as long as a pen-knife. You are a man who lives only for himself. No one else matters to you. Last month my brother was here, and you didn't come out of your room till he was about to leave. Aarna says Papa behaves strangely sometimes. I say you behave strangely all the time. Something is seriously wrong with your head. You must see a doctor."

"That's enough!" Sunder said rather sharply. "I admit my mistake and you go on branding me mad. I will go to the market again and fetch those things in a minute."

"No! There is no need. I have kept some alu-gobhi in the fridge for the night. It is my karma to be stuck with you, to feed you, look after you. That I will till I am alive. Now go back to your room and watch TV. Your sight irritates me."

As he turned to go, Shakun threw the bananas at him. He ducked just in time and the bunch thwacked onto the floor. "Take these with you," she yelled, "I don't need any of them. And look, it's time for me to go to the kirtan. I won't be back till 8 in the evening." She banged her door shut, perhaps to change for going out. Sunder went to his room in disquiet.

Thoroughly let down by his inadequacy, he sat in his rocking chair thinking of the ways to redeem himself in Shakun's eyes. She could indeed be very exacting at times. It was not that she spared herself. From seven in the morning when she got up and made tea for the two of them, till half-past nine at night when she sat down to watch her favourite TV serials after the dinner, she kept herself busy with one thing or the other. To him she had left just a couple of tasks: bringing milk from the local vend and putting the washed clothes out to dry on the wire hung outside their balcony. On rare occasions, such as the one that had happened today, she would send him out on an errand. His chief responsibility as the man of the house was to see that on the first day of the month there was enough cash in the house to see them through the ensuing period. This he did religiously from his pension of a deputy assistant director of Defence Accounts Department. Her own pension she re-

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served for meeting travel and sundry expenses such as giving gifts at the weddings and so forth.

The idea of learning to cook had come to him thanks to his ardent desire to be useful around the house, to build bridges with her. He could make good tea, which even Shakun liked to have. Boiling rice was easier than making tea. He handled even dals which entailed subtler details of tadka, though subzi dishes he never tried his hands on. She watched on amusedly when mood took Sunder to try his hand at cooking. She said the skill would prove useful to him on occasions when he happened to be alone in the house.

Encouraged by her, Sunder took another faltering step in the art of cooking – of making rotis. He began with the beginning - kneading the dough. This was a dismal failure, not once but three or four times. The flour became unmanageable because of excess of water, or the gooey stuff stuck to all the ten fingers of his. Shakun made helpful suggestions but when it came to following them, Sunder mixed up on the essentials of the right quantities of flour and water. Yet, on an auspicious day, he managed at last to knead a bowlful of dough to Shakun's satisfaction. Now he was mentally prepared to bake rotis. His repeated attempts at this business were so disappointing that he decided not to engage in it when Shakun was around. Even so, he was determined to keep up his practice till he was successful. This evening his perseverance seemed to have paid off.

At ten minutes to eight, the bell rang. It was Shakun. Sunder pretended to be resentful over the drubbing he had received from her a few hours ago. Staring at the bananas which still lay where she had thrown them, she said to him tauntingly, "Now your eyesight too is failing, I guess!" Assured of his upper hand this time, he looked her in the eye and said, "I don't care!" Shakun seemed in no mood to join in the argument. Picking up the now squishy bananas, she threw them into the wastebin. Sunder was eager to draw her attention to the kitchen slab where he had kept the casserole of rotis. "Shall I make a cup

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of tea for you, Shakun?" He asked in an even tone in the hope that she might go towards the kitchen. "This is no time for tea!" She said dismissively and moving to her room, closed the door behind her. Sunder decided that she would take her time lighting the ceremonial lamp before the altar and changing into her night dress. The 8 'o clock news bulletin was on. He returned to his TV.

Five minutes had not passed when he heard the summons to face another "Suno!" moment of the day. In the kitchen, she stood in her characteristic posture holding the rotis in her hands – the rotis he had been so proud of. "You have baked these rotis, I believe!" She said as if accusing him of a misdeed.

"Yes, I did; obviously."

"What for?"

"To eat, I mean, for both of us."

"Do you think we are buffaloes to eat such stuff? Even those dumb beasts won't."

"Why, they are well baked. Each one of these rotis had swelled up before I took them off the stove."

"But have you seen their underside? They all are raw. Look at them!"

Holding the rotis she thrust into his hands, Sunder realised to his dismay that they marked only half a feat of his.

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Ward A1

Sushant Dhar

Each organ is now shadowed by water. You can't see anything in the scans. Every day starts with intralipids, saline, vancomycin, meropenem and butapil. The famous flautist of the town is afflicted by a rare disease. All of it cannot be translated into words and expressed in a language that is limiting. Some of the portion of this story has been deliberately not included here because the story is long. I'm also wary of my inability to express it in a way that is original and reflective of the situation. Nobody knows what lies ahead. Everybody is waiting for that final moment. There are not many people around. Friends, relatives, and other family members have already left the place. People can't stay here for longer. They've their own personal lives to attend to. Life is such. Many among us want to forget what we saw, we can't process it. The sudden halt of life is incomprehensible. The treatment will prolong. The ailment has taken control of the body. The distant past is lurking in the corridors of the Intensive Care Unit, making him remember everything that has happened to him. He graduated in music in the year 1997 from the Institute of Fine Arts, Jammu. The University selected him for a six month internship programme in Athens to learn music. He stayed there for five years under the Government-funded scholarship and on return was offered a faculty position in the Central University. Rajan refused that and went on to pursue his art, learning from the masters across the country. Varanasi, Pushkar, Kolkata, Jaipur, Agra, Mumbai, Delhi. His first concert was organized in the Central Hall of the Capital in the year 2006. The audience was enthralled by the performance. He occupied a central figure in the music fraternity. His first international concert was in Crete in 2008. He was also awarded the honorary degree by the Eu-

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ropean School of Music at Paris. Rajan was living his dream, expressing himself in entirety. His hard work and daily toil finally yielded results. He has created his own unique style of playing a raga. He considers the flute as his temple, its sound his god. He plays in the shadows, under the moon, on the rooftop for the whole night invoking longing and love in our hearts. He loves his music. His rendition of Raag Nat Bhairav is soul-stirring. We were together a day before he was diagnosed with this disease. We had seven cups of coffee. He wept profusely. It happened to him whenever he performed; his eyes closed, in trance and the sudden outburst of tears. It was full-moon night, the night of Kartik Purnima. It appeared as if his entire body and soul was taken over by some superior energy. He played so many ragas. It was one of those nights which will remain embedded in my heart and memory forever. This is what transpired in the last seven months of his life. He was driving past the City Chowk waiting for the green signal, a minute later he turned cold and stiff like a stone and was not able to move the steering and push through the accelerator paddle. The traffic behind pulled over thinking that the car broke down. An hour has passed. He isn't able to decipher anything. The policeman shouts at length for almost 10 minutes, not able to comprehend the situation. People gather around, it's almost 2 hours now but the car is still in the centre of the Chowk. People break the glass, he's mumbling. He was taken to the scan room. The doctor informs the family that a rare tumor has been detected on the right side of the brain and needs an immediate surgery so that it doesn't spread. He is operated in a hurry. Two months later another scan and the tumor is seen to have grown on sideways. Consultation with another doctor is arranged who says that the surgery is impossible as the skull is filled with pus. He's now admitted at the Oncology Centre. The attendant brings him to the hospital every month for a life-saving injection. During the entire commute, he doesn't talk much and just looks at the vacant space passing by the car. His eyes don't blink even for a second, a fixed gaze at the time

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passing by; as if he has been emptied of everything. He doesn't feel anything, he hardly expresses pain, his body is all marked by the injections and the tattoos inscribed on the vertebral and lumbar spine in the radiation room. He's devoid of any aspirations. The flute is his companion. He writes letters to his friends living abroad; narrating his daily ordeals. His mother hasn't been informed. She won't survive this. "I'm in the hall. I've been assigned a File number. The ward A1 is on the first floor. It has 9 beds equipped with ventilators. There are innumerable wards in the hospital, of different shapes, colors and sizes. It's the only hospital in the town. Every bed is partitioned with white curtains. It's another realm. Dreamlike. The drug is slowly entering the veins of the patients. Each one of them is carrying a blanket, a bottle of mineral water and the blue dye. It's the chemo ward. Patients are slipping into their quilts, dozing while raag yaman sinks and swells in the adjacent hall, seeping through their bodies, healing them as they battle with the life consuming diseases, making them forget Time and its constituents. There's peaceful silence, attendants leave their patients, enter the waiting room, lights are turned off as the patients tuck themselves up in the warmth of the flute. They will never be the same. They will never be what they were. Everything will change. Everything will leave. New patients are arriving and the old ones are departing. Life is going on. So is death. Patients open their oxygen masks, remove the saline drips, walk into the hall and sit motionless on the floor. Rajan holds his flute and begins meditating on it. No force on the earth can console him. His condition is irreversible. He's a young musician, displaced living in a distant land away from his family. He wants to live. He has been reduced to bone. He's out of breath. Gutted. The fingers holding the flute shiver, he gathers himself and his breath, sobs, presses his fluffy blood stained lips against the flute and continues with his favorite raag for the entire evening. We are crying. Rajan is playing Ahir Bhairav and thereafter the hospital tape plays Shobha Gurtu's Kajri "Sawan Ki Ritu Ayee Re Sajaniya, Pritam Ghar Nahi Aaye". Every-

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thing remains suspended. I'm lying lifeless on the hospital bed, staring at the long roof above. Life lingers. Life torments me. What will happen to me when the long night approaches? I can't sleep and breathe. Can I go home? Can I meet my mother? The cancer is in the bone too, inside the femur and the vertebral column. I can't swallow. They name it bulbar palsy. What about my art? What about the final expression? A dose of Denub every month keeps me up. I'm on the other side of the world now, away from everything, alone. What will become of me? How much life is remaining in my brain and bones? Where shall I go? I'm at the gates wanting to leave, wanting to stay, a year more. What's going to happen to my family and the world after I'm gone? Why was I here? What purpose did I serve? What was this whole thing about? Futile, Futile! Thoughts assail him; leaving him gasping for breath. He cannot go home. His vitals are haywire. A new patient has been admitted adjacent to his bed. A laborer from the far north was hit by a speeding truck. He's in coma; on the ventilator. His wife has been informed of the accident. She has travelled all the way from her home, 2000 miles in the General Coach of the only train that passes through their village. It took her three days to reach this place alien to her. She has travelled alone. She speaks and understands the native language. She isn't able to make anything of the situation. The doctors can't make her understand the condition of her husband. She nurses her ailing husband day and night. She hasn't slept in the past seven days. She has four children. Another bed has just been occupied by a child who fell from the hilltop while playing. He's unconscious. His father is distraught. A month has passed. A daily routine of tests has been set in motion: arterial blood gas, venous blood gas, chest x-ray, USG, ECG. The central venous catheter has been inserted near the neck. Rajan knows there's no headway. His veins are all punctured. The body stands completely wasted; legs have metamorphosed into thin wooden shafts. He's immobile, vegetative; trying to reconcile with his condition. He's left with a lone attendant who's helping him on

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the bed, turning him left right, noting his saturation, systole diastole. The woman massages the legs of her husband day and night. She's hopeful of his recovery. Rajan won't ever forget the stoic expression on her face, the unwavering dignity in her demeanor. There's nobody on the bed the day after. The sheets are stained with body fluids. The machine has stopped beeping. The body has been tied at the legs, draped in white. The woman is nowhere in sight. She's sitting near the main door of the ICU ward. Her husband is no more. She's alone. She has to perform the last rites on her own. The body has been moved to the mortuary. His vacant bed has been replaced by a young patient who has suffered seizures. The boy has no memory of his past. He doesn't recognize his parents who are accompanying him. He's out of breath. He only talks about a place abound with snow. A snow clad mountain. A village draped in white, some other place, the place from his past, from his previous lives, the land of exiles, a happy dream and the sad reality. Has he really suffered memory loss or is he faking? Is it deliberate? The past torments him and the present is disturbing. He wants to be in an unreal place that feels real, a portion of Time that heals him and transports him out of this pain and agony. The present moment is bone crushing. Is there a way to escape this? The boy is wakeful; giggles throughout the night, continues with a lengthy monologue on life, exodus and the endless opportunities lying ahead. He talks about shifting to his dream city in a month or two, about his customized apartment on the 90th floor of a skyscraper. He's hopeful that he will regain control of his senses. He has to return to his college and appear for the internal exams. Rajan is contemplating on the human condition around him. He doubts his own journey and struggle. He's dangling between the real and the unreal. He has lost sense of the time and the purpose of life. Everything is transitory, all human life a fleeting moment. Why did I choose this arduous ascent? What have I achieved? The young girl on the other bed just passed away. She was on the ventilator for two months. She howled all night. The ward was

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her home. Every doctor and nurse knew her. She had breathing issues. It's all about breath, its rhythm and the movement through the trachea. She was only 17. Her mother is inconsolable. Mother kisses the knees of her daughter, caresses her forehead. All she wanted was a glass of cold milk and a plate full of mango slices. She always insisted on the specific variety of mangoes that appeared in the market before the monsoons. The mother has been forcefully taken away from the body. Rajan talks about his unrequited love for the first time. Nobody knew the story around it, not even his close friends, family members and other acquaintances. He never mentioned it in any of his conversations with us. Rajan is a private man as far as his personal life is concerned. He didn't mention the name even now, only that he loves somebody and that he needs her most at this point of time in his life. His inability to inform her is what weakens him from inside, causing more pain and mental agony. A month has passed. The kidneys have stopped functioning. I made persistent efforts for the entire day to visit him once for the last time in the ICU. Nobody is allowed to enter. He suffered cardiac arrest last night. I'm guided by the head nurse through several colored rooms. They put a face mask and a blue apron on me. I'm in a big hall blinded by glaring lights. The space is partitioned by white curtains and aluminum sheets. I can count all the patients in this ward. All of them are incubated; looking up. There are five nurses at the nursing station. I'm standing near bed number three. The window pane near his bed opens to the full moon. The doctor is making notes on the long sheets. The page mentions day thirty two on the top. I look at the screens adjacent to his bed. His vitals are bad. He has just been sedated. I gather enormous courage and shift my gaze towards him. His face is miserable. He has lost all hope. The eyelids are static, gleaming pupils alive, moving up and down. He nods his head sideways asking me to leave. I can't translate that expression into words. I will never forget the color of his face. It's indescribable. It broke me. He has given up on life. His memory has drained, he hard-

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y remembers a thing. He has lost the very concept of minutes and hours. Rajan twitches his eyelids for the final time. "I'm surrounded by menacing darkness. I'm frightened like a goat waiting to be slaughtered. My condition is pitiable. I am not expecting a happy death. Can death ever be a happy experience? Maybe or maybe not! I never belonged here. Life didn't happen to me. I'm yet to find the final expression. What about my music? It's all incomplete. I haven't reached. I'm going to miss the places I've inhabited; the walls of my room, the hanging portraits from my childhood, my desk, bed, the book shelf, the space outside, the trees alongside the boundary wall, chirping of birds, sunrise, sunset, all the colors, the orient ceiling fan, rains, summer, all the seasons, my flute, routine practice/ sadhana, each one of my family members. Where am I going? I don't know. I don't want to leave. Why so early? All I need is a blank spot of memory so as to forget this agonizing journey. I'm preparing for the final departure, away from home. The moon is shifting places; sinking into the haze, I'm in the pyre, so that was it, I'm ice cold, can't feel a thing, it has started....."

(The author is a writer, based in Jammu.)

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Book Review

A Review of Manzoor Akash's *Between Echoes and Shadows*

Title of the book	: *Between Echoes and Shadows*
Author	: Manzoor Akash
Year of publication	: 2024
Publisher	: Suman Publications, Greater Noida, UP
Number of pages	: 79

Iftikhar Imran

Between Echoes and Shadows is Manzoor Akash's moving tribute to the rich heritage of Kashmiri culture. What goes hand in hand with the tribute, nonetheless, is a coterminous and sweeping elegy of its gradual erosion. The poems that capture the delicate interplay between memory and loss, tradition and modernity, and mourn the gradual disappearance of cultural practices once vibrant and revered also evoke the splendor of a bygone era and the devastating fragility of cultural heritage now eroding under the weight of the modern cultural zeitgeist. Manzoor Akash gives voice to a universal yearning for cultural continuity and identity, acknowledging both the beauty of tradition and the agony of its diminishing relevance. He presents a tapestry of themes that traverse cultural identity, loss, resilience, nostalgia, nature, social moorings and customs, and personal introspection. The emotional resonance of the poems is a navigating tool into the complexities of a homeland scarred by modernity yet pulsating with beauty and history.

The poems resonate with the rhythms of Kashmiri life – its festivals, folklore, social practices, cuisine, the majestic beauty of its landscapes, the cool serenity of its lakes and the warm aroma of qahwa. The palpable nostalgia that the images con-

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jure is juxtaposed with scenes of cultural fragmentation, urbanization and the younger generation's disconnection from their roots. The poet's lament over the gradual extinction of the Kashmiri language is particularly moving insofar that it highlights how language loss portends a deeper cultural amnesia.

Manzoor Akash takes his readers on a journey to experience the rituals and customs of Kashmir and offers snapshots of a world steeped in celebration and meaning, where traditions are not merely practiced but embodied and lived.

The juxtaposition of the lively past with the hollow present is achieved by conveying both emptiness and unnatural growth, as if absence itself has taken root where tradition once flourished. The collection's emotional core deepens as it shifts from celebration to lamentation. The poet's grief is layered with frustration, guilt, and longing, acknowledging not only the external forces that contribute to cultural erosion but also the internal neglect from those meant to safeguard these traditions. Many poems portray traditional crafts as fragile relics of identity, slowly discarded by younger generations drawn to modernity's allure. The ideational coherence stems from the poet's clear and unwavering focus on the tragic human transition from creative artistry to mechanized detachment which is by no chance an inevitable historical transition. The melancholy in the poems is palpable, but intensified by the implication that what is lost is not merely a craft, but a deeper sense of purpose and belonging.

The motif of memory recurs throughout the collection, emphasizing the fragility of cultural preservation. As a matter of fact, Manzoor Akash employs memory as a tool to reconstruct the past through sensory recall, clinging to fragments of tradition that linger only as scents and sensations. The poet creates a visceral experience that transcends the mere act of recollection. It is a testament to the resilience of memory even when the tangible practices themselves have faded. He challenges the hollowness of the modern cultural imaginary and his use of

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irony is far from gentle in saying that our entire cultural heritage has now been confined to is nun chai, qahwa and wazwan. Between Echoes and Shadows is laid out so as to lead the reader from vivid recollections of cultural vibrancy to the sobering reality of erosion. However, it is not solely an exercise in mourning. As the collection progresses, a subtle yet persistent undercurrent of hope begins to surface. Manzoor Akash suggests that fragments of the past can still be reclaimed, albeit imperfectly. While the tone is often melancholic, it is not devoid of hope. The poems suggest that reclamation is possible, if only through storytelling, art, and deliberate efforts to pass down traditions. Between Echoes and Shadows serves as a powerful reminder of the importance of cultural preservation in a rapidly changing world. The poet offers a cautiously optimistic conclusion as he suggests that even in the face of overwhelming loss, memory can serve as both refuge and guide. The poet acknowledges the challenges of preserving cultural heritage, but also affirms the possibility of revival through conscious effort and remembrance while he rejects the view that memory is merely a site for cultural decadence.

Each poem functions as a fragment of a broader narrative – a dialogue between memory and reality, longing and acceptance. The reader is gently led through a gallery where the present is inseparable from the past, and where cultural loss becomes both a personal and collective tragedy.

The poet's exploration of cultural identity is central to the collection. The poems delve into the erosion of traditions and the anguish of watching ancestral practices wither under the strain of modernization. The poems constitute not only lament but also acts of preservation, striving to capture fleeting moments of cultural vitality before they disappear entirely. The poet's nostalgia for festivals and rituals is tinged with a sharp awareness of their fading presence as he tries to capture the heartache of witnessing cherished practices fall into oblivion and the juxtaposition of vibrant tradition and present-day desolation conveys a profound sense of loss. Yet, even in the

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despair of cultural erosion, the poet hints at resilience through remembrance.

Nature emerges as a prominent motif, often intertwined with the poet's reflections on identity and loss. The landscapes of Kashmir –its mountains, rivers, and valleys –serve as both sanctuary and witness, and nature becomes a custodian of memory. The poet's descriptions of natural beauty are tinged with dejection, suggesting a yearning for a purer, uncorrupted past. Yet, nature also serves as a metaphor for resilience and continuity, offering solace even when human institutions fail. The pastoral imagery throughout the collection is both celebratory and elegiac as the poet intertwines natural beauty with sorrowful introspection, using landscape as a mirror to human suffering. The haunting presence of Kashmir's rural landscape, which is losing existence with every passing day, gives the poems a gothic aura as against the bucolic facade that Manzoor Akash builds with echoes and reminiscences from his idyllic childhood.

Interspersed with broader cultural and social themes are poems that delve into the poet's personal journey of self-discovery. The poet reflects on identity, belonging and the struggle to reconcile personal longings with present-day social customs and expectations. These introspective pieces provide a delicate counterpoint to the more outwardly focused poems, illustrating the complexity of navigating one's own emotional landscape amidst external turmoil.

The poet's voice often shifts from collective mourning to individual contemplation, allowing readers to witness a deeply personal reckoning with identity. This dual focus enriches the collection, offering both intimate reflection and a broader cultural critique.

The role that craft plays in writing poetry can hardly be underlined. Craft is not a rigid set of rules but rather a set of tools poets use to refine their art. While inspiration provides the spark, craft provides the structure and technique necessary to transform that spark into something enduring.

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Having said that, the potential of the poems' raw emotions to attain both excellence and communicability in the hands of a writer with a solid grip on foundational syntax, musicality and rhythm, structure and form, imagery, symbolism and economy of language has remained largely unexplored. A pre-publication revision and refinement by an expert in the field would certainly have enhanced the readability of the poems.

In conclusion, Between Echoes and Shadows is a meditation on the tension between preservation and loss. It demonstrates a profound understanding of how cultural erosion affects both individual identity and collective memory. By giving voice to these concerns, the poet achieves something remarkable: a work that is both mournful and restorative, acknowledging the inevitability of change while fiercely advocating for the value of remembrance. For those familiar with Kashmiri culture, the collection offers a mirror of recognition; for others, it opens a doorway to understanding. For anyone who has watched beloved traditions wither under the strain of time, or for those striving to keep their cultural heritage alive, it is an interesting read.

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